Rubens in Gotha
Collection, Loss, and Return

With the support of the
Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung







Rubens in Gotha

Collection, Loss, and Return

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MICHAEL IMHOF VERLAG

M DC XXX

PETRVS PAVLVS RVBENS.

Paulus Pontius Sculpsit.

Cum Privilegio

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FOREWORD

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear Friends of Friedenstein,

Thuringia is a land of culture. You can see this in every corner of the Free State: in our churches, castles, palaces and museums. Preserving and researching this heritage is our shared task. At Friedenstein in Gotha, one senses just how great a task it is. There, step by step, the Federal Government and the Free State are restoring the largest early Baroque palace ensemble in Germany. And the Friedenstein Stiftung cares for the collections that are at home here.

These collections have lost a great deal. Financial hardship, war, removals to the Soviet Union, theft from within their own ranks and, in 1979, the largest art theft in the history of the GDR have torn deep gaps in them. Since reunification, Friedenstein has been endeavouring, piece by piece, to bring back what belongs to it.

In this endeavour it has strong partners. The Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation has stood at Gotha's side for many years. It made possible the return of the Old Master paintings stolen in 1979. It supports restorations, exhibitions and research into the losses. This research pays off. After all, anyone who can document how a work was lost need not buy it back at its full market price. Thus, only in September, a precious jade ewer returned home, its acquisition jointly funded by the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, the Rudolf-August Oetker Stiftung and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation.

Now comes the next step, and once again it concerns Peter Paul Rubens. Around 1620 the Flemish master painted oil sketches for the ceiling paintings of the Jesuit church in Antwerp. The ceiling paintings themselves were destroyed by fire in 1718 after a lightning strike. Five of the sketches on which they were based belonged to Gotha. 'St Athanasius' and 'St Basil' have been back in Gotha since 1958. 'St Gregory of Nazianzus' returned in the summer of 2024 with the support of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation. Now, 'The Prophet Elijah in a Golden Chariot' is returning to Gotha permanently, and 'St Augustine' is with us as a guest, on loan.

Thus, for the first time in more than 80 years, all five of the Gotha oil sketches can once again be seen together at Friedenstein, initially for a short time only.

With this, the Rubens Year is already beginning: in 2027, we celebrate the 450th anniversary of the painter's birth. I thank the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation for its sustained commitment, especially the Chairman of its Board of Trustees, Prof. Dr Dirk Syndram, and its Secretary General, Dr Martin Hoernes. Money helps, but people who give of themselves over many years and share their knowledge help even more. The finest recognition of this commitment is the many visitors who will not miss the opportunity to see all five sketches reunited.

Come to Gotha and see for yourselves what a unique cultural treasure has returned!

Yours,



Christian Tischner
Thuringian Minister for Education, Science and Culture

FOREWORD

Dear Friends of Friedenstein,

A Rubens year is always a reason to celebrate; after all, it marks the 450th anniversary of the great master's birth. In Gotha, however, this anniversary means something more: it is a year of discovery, of remembrance and of reflection.
For the history of the Friedenstein collections is not only a history of collecting, but also a history of loss. What generations of dukes, scholars and art lovers had brought together over the centuries was torn apart in the 20th century: through sales, wartime losses, removals to the Soviet Union, relocations to Coburg and, finally, the spectacular art theft of 1979. Some objects returned, but much remained lost. Every gap in our collections tells its own story.
Peter Paul Rubens, in particular, epitomises this chequered fate. Over the course of time, five extremely valuable oil sketches by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens were housed at Friedenstein. With the end of the Second World War, all five works were lost. Two of them were taken to the Soviet Union as war reparations and returned to Gotha in 1959. The remaining three works stayed missing.
In 2024, with the help of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, the oil sketch *St Gregory of Nazianzus* was successfully brought back. In 2026, the same foundation was also able to re-acquire the fourth work, *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot*, for Gotha. The fifth oil sketch, *St Augustine*, is being lent to Gotha by the E. G. Bührle Foundation in Switzerland. And so, for the first time in more than 80 years, the five works by Peter Paul Rubens are reunited. This is not only an art-historical but also a political sensation of worldwide significance, for in Gotha, what belongs to Gotha is growing together again!
Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, who often and gladly stayed in Gotha and held the Friedenstein collections in high esteem, wrote of the great masters:

'In their sacred histories, Rembrandt, Raphael, Rubens seem to me like true saints, who feel God to be present everywhere, at every step, in the chamber and in the field, and who have no need of the elaborate pomp of temples and sacrifices to drag Him to their hearts. I place together here three masters whom one is almost always wont to keep apart by mountains and seas; but I might well make so bold as to set down

many another great name beside them and to prove that they were all alike in this essential respect.'

It is wholly in this spirit that we are delighted, and owe our patrons an eternal debt of gratitude, that the 'Rubens Collection of Gotha' is once again united in its original home, the Ducal Museum Gotha, in this 450th anniversary year – a museum that is now increasingly able to live up to its claim to be a 'Louvre of Thuringia'.

Yours

Knut Kreuch
Lord Mayor

FOREWORD

Here's to Rubens!

The five oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens that were once on display together in the Ducal Museum in Gotha can be seen together again for the first time since 1945. They have returned from Moscow and America and, as a long-term loan, from Zurich, where they had ended up after 1945 as looted art or through unlawful sales. They shared this fate with numerous other treasures from the Gotha collections, some of which are still awaiting their return to this day.

How does a museum deal with its numerous losses? It makes them public! Just as it has done since 1997 through Gotha's loss documentation for the Kunstkammer [Art Chamber] and the Picture Gallery, later through the 1,250 entries in the Lost Art Database of the German Lost Art Foundation and, most recently, through the EvSK-funded catalogue of the holdings and losses of the Ducal Kunstkammer. Since 2020 the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation has supported the work on Gotha's own losses: first with a revision of the Lost Art entries, which were based on the older loss documentation, and then with the development of the scholarly and legal foundations, the three 'lines of loss', in order to document the losses through embezzlement, the unlawful removal of cultural property or theft according to present-day standards. Since then, Gotha's claims for the return of its works can be substantiated beyond doubt and brought to bear in purchase negotiations.

This strategy has paid off. First, in 2024, the Rubens sketch *St Gregory of Nazianzus* was successfully brought back from the Buffalo AKG Art Museum with the help of Christie's. And now the next coup: this year it became possible to bring back *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot*, the first of the five oil sketches, which had already been acquired by Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha- Altenburg (1676–1732). The foundation financed both returns almost single-handedly and mediated with the art dealership Cabinet Turquin (Paris) in finding a fair compromise. At the same time, however, another masterstroke was achieved: an agreement was reached with the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection in Zurich, so that now the last missing sketch, *St Augustine*, is also being shown in Gotha once again as a long-term loan. Unexpectedly right on time for the Rubens

year, the strategy of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation has led to a spectacular success, which we are celebrating together with the Belgian Embassy: my warmest thanks go to everyone involved! The historic group of works, which until the Second World War had been one of the particular highlights of the Ducal Museum, can now be experienced in Gotha once again. I offer my heartfelt congratulations on this and, in that spirit: here's to Rubens!

Dr Martin Hoernes
Secretary General of the
Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation

PREFACE

On 13 January 2021, I received an email from Dirk Boll of the auction house Christie's, asking for a phone call. No one could have guessed at the time that this would turn into an undertaking that was to occupy us for years and become one of the most significant events in the history of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha: the return of the five oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens.

From the very beginning, this was about far more than the recovery of outstanding works of art. It was about engaging with our history, about questions of provenance, ownership and loss, about the consequences of war and injustice, and about the responsibility of a cultural institution for the heritage in its care.

That the five oil sketches can once again be experienced in the Ducal Museum today borders on the miraculous. It is the result of years of perseverance, of scholarly exchange, of international cooperation and of a shared trust in the power of art, which unites everyone involved.

For me, this success also exemplifies the development of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha in recent years. We have consistently understood and developed Friedenstein as an open, internationally networked centre for collections and research. Through the systematic reappraisal of Gotha's histories of loss, the firm establishment of provenance research, the acquisition of scholarly and legal expertise and the building of responsible partnerships, conditions have been created that reach far beyond this single success.

The presentation of the Rubens sketches as the prelude to the international Rubens Year 2027 is thus not only an art-historical event, but also the expression of a transformed sense of self. It becomes clear that strategic foresight, clear objectives and guiding principles, professional expertise and a delight in dialogue enormously increase the visibility and relevance of museums. In Gotha, the basis for this was created by substantial third-party funding, the extraordinary commitment of all the foundation's colleagues and our partners.

The Gotha collections were never of merely regional significance. Their history is shaped by European exchange and worldwide interconnections. Making this international standing visible once more was, and remains, a central concern of my work. The five Rubens

sketches embody this in a special way. They are both masterpieces of European art and testimonies to a turbulent history of loss and return.

My particular thanks go to Martin Hoernes and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation for an exceptional partnership, and to Dirk Boll, Friederike von Brühl, Eric Turquin and Alexander Jolles for their trust and their commitment. I am equally grateful to Nils Büttner, Timo Trümper, Ronny Licht and Katrin Tenner for their scholarly and curatorial work. Christiane Backhaus oversaw the loans and Susanne Finne-Hörr was responsible for the precise and timely communication. The publication was in the hands of the Michael Imhof Verlag. My thanks go to all the foundation's staff and to all the supporters who made this success possible.

With the five oil sketches, it is not merely the most important ensemble that returns to the Picture Gallery. Gotha and Thuringia have thereby also regained a piece of cultural identity. That it is a European identity, of all things, that is at stake here seems far from insignificant in view of the current public debates in Thuringia and beyond. Art unites people, it bridges divides and brings people together; it inspires, connects and helps to shape the future.

Dr Tobias Pfeifer-Helke
Director of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha



Martin Hoernes

RUBENS, ROBBERY, RESEARCH, RETURN. GRANTS FROM THE ERNST VON SIEMENS ART FOUNDATION IN GOTHA

Losses from Gotha and their documentation

On the occasion of the small but spectacular exhibition 'Focus on Rubens!', it is important to recall Gotha's princely collections – their quality, their history and, above all, their numerous losses, which since the early 20th century have reached an extent rarely seen in any other German cultural institution. In 1979, the so-called Gotha Art Heist took place, 'the most spectacular art theft in the GDR'. Together with Gotha's Lord Mayor, Knut Kreuch, and the art lawyer Dr Friederike Gräfin von Brühl, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation (EvSK) succeeded in partially reconstructing the case and, above all, in recovering the five stolen Old Master paintings without making any payment (fig. 1). Since then, the EvSK has, so to speak, held a 'subscription' to facilitating the return of stolen or embezzled art to German museums or collections, and it is repeatedly asked for assistance in such cases. Among them are Charles Le Brun's recently returned *Holy Family*, formerly in the Neues Palais in Potsdam, which was stolen after 1942 from its evacuation site at Schloss Rheinsberg (fig. 2); a precious 17th-century jade jug (fig. 3), returned to Gotha in Sep-



Fig. 1 The five Old Master paintings stolen in 1979 and returned in 2019, at the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation in Berlin



Fig. 2 Charles Le Brun: *Holy Family* (c. 1655), oil on canvas, diameter 88 cm, Potsdam, Neues Palais

tember; and a late Gothic drawing of a tower (fig. 4), which had once been stolen from the Architecture Museum of the Technical University of Munich.

At Schloss Friedenstein, German history is reflected in a unique way in the losses suffered by its art collections. Shortly after the end of the Second World War, it was initially the princely house of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha that sought to save the works of an independent Gotha art foundation, established in 1928, from the Soviet trophy brigades. The family took them to Coburg as a 'temporary protective measure' but never returned them; instead, it sold them on the art market.



Fig. 3 Silver-mounted lidded jade jug (c. 1630), Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. no. K1110

The Red Army, which followed the Americans into Thuringia, transported numerous art treasures to Moscow and St Petersburg in violation of international law. In 1958, a large proportion of them was returned to the GDR, and since 1959 many works have once again been on display in Gotha. Nevertheless, nearly 20 paintings by Lucas Cranach are still exhibited in the Pushkin Museum in Moscow, and numerous precious-metal vessels from the Gotha Kunstkammer remain on display at the Hermitage in St Petersburg, labelled as 'assignments from the State Depot for Precious Metals and Gemstones'.

The two Gotha loss catalogues and the 1,250 entries in the Lost Art Database of the German Lost Art Foundation give an idea of the sheer scale of the losses (figs 5–6). The transfer of valuable works of art to Bavaria and to the Soviet Union apparently also led to a complete loss of restraint: the holdings of the Graphic Arts Collection and the Kunstkammer were plundered.

The objects were not removed from the inventories; instead, they turned up at the Colussi & Co. antiques shop in Erfurt under the misleading labels 'discarded works of art' or 'duplicates'. The sale of museum objects was strictly prohibited by the military administration and the



Fig. 4 Hans von Baden: late Gothic drawing of a tower (1495), black ink on parchment, 1 55 x 21.5 cm, Technical University of Munich, Architecture Museum, inv. no. oa-667-1



Fig. 5 Allmuth Schuttwolf: *Verlustdokumentation der Gothaer Kunstsammlungen*, vol. II: *Die Gemäldesammlung* (Documentation of Losses from the Gotha Art Collections, vol. II: The Painting Collection), Gotha: Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein, 2011

Ministry of Culture. Nevertheless, these treasures eventually reached Darmstadt in the West via the dealership – since renamed 'Antiquariat Müller' – and from there passed into the hands of private collectors.

Since reunification, numerous sponsors – first and foremost the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, supported by the EvSK, the federal government, the Rudolf-August Oetker Foundation and others – have sought to bring lost works back. The magnificent ivory tankard by Johann Ernst Kadau (fig. 7), which had to be bought at auction in 2017, will, it is hoped, prove to be the last such case. I myself was involved in many of these efforts, both at the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States and at the EvSK, long before we fully understood the complexities of the legal situa-



Fig. 6 Screenshot of the entry in the Lost Art Database of the German Lost Art Foundation for Peter Paul Rubens's oil sketch *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* (accessed October 2026)



Fig. 7 Johann Ernst Kadau(w) II and Christoph Maucher (attributed): ivory tankard with silver-gilt mounts (c. 1674/80), Danzig, height 22.5 cm, diameter 14.8 cm; Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. no. K57

tion in Gotha. Only after the return of the five stolen Old Master paintings in 2019 did the EvSK first fund the updating of the entries in the Lost Art Database, as part of its COVID-19 funding programme.

The return of three enamelled silver bowls by the Augsburg master Tobias Baur (fig. 8) is directly linked to this clarification of the institution's own losses. The EvSK later facilitated the development of a legal framework for Gotha's three so-called 'lines of loss' by the lawyers Dr Friederike Gräfin von Brühl and Patrick Marré, followed by research by the legal scholar Prof. Dr Thomas Finkenauer and the institution's in-house provenance researcher, Ronny Licht.

Returns

To put it plainly, the issues in Gotha therefore involve confiscation or embezzlement by the princely family, looted art seized by the Red Army in violation of international law, and thefts by staff of the library, the museum or their administrative offices. None of these 'alienations', as they are termed in administrative jargon, was legally justified under any circumstances. The Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha remains the owner of its expropriated collection items to this day.

Enforcing this claim in law, however, is a complex process. In most cases the offence itself is time-barred, handling stolen goods is almost impossible to prove,



Fig. 8 Tobias Baur: three bowls with painted enamel (c. 1701/1705), silver, embossed, chased and gilt, painted enamel with gold inlays on copper, diameter 11 cm each, height 2.5 cm each, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. nos. K1078, K1079, K1080

and the object is now in the possession of a purchaser who acquired it in good faith. Alternatively, former Gotha treasures are now housed in 'West German' museums – among them the Codex Aureus of Echternach in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg (fig. 9) and the Rembrandt self-portrait in the Alte Pinakothek (fig. 10), which features in the current exhibition. Their allegedly 'lawful acquisition' from a questionable successor foundation was approved in the post-war period by the competent Bavarian foundation supervisory authority, bypassing the GDR. Today, in accordance with Articles P. 10 and C. 10 of the ICOM Code of Ethics, museums commit themselves to combating the illicit art trade and to cooperating with the rightful owners. They make exhibits accessible to the public or lend masterpieces to one another, as with the Rembrandt portrait mentioned above. This calls for cooperative solutions, such as temporary exhibitions at two venues or permanent loans.

If, however, a work of art originally from Gotha re-enters the market today from a private or museum collection, decisive action is needed. The legal position is now clearly defined: Gotha is prohibited from purchasing such works at full market price, and the works bear a publicly recognisable blemish that hinders their resale. Nor is it in any way permissible for the museum from which the works were stolen to buy back its own lost property at market price with the help of sponsors. It is therefore essential to make the legal status of the lost works of art public and to demonstrate that numerous objects stolen from Gotha are still in circulation. On the basis of the 'loss records' compiled, Gotha and its supporters are very well placed to return objects that, by today's moral and legal standards, can no longer be traded to their original location. Fair prices can be negotiated with responsible sellers, and bona fide purchasers can be reimbursed for their expenses; any speculation in stolen cultural property, however, must be prevented. In the numerous repatriation efforts, we often rely on the commitment of the sponsoring organisations and co-sponsors.

The following contributed to the return of the jade jug mentioned above (see fig. 3): the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha – that is, the state and the city – the Rudolf-August Oetker Foundation, the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, the Galerie J. Kugel in Paris and the EvSK, which made it possible to reach a compromise with the French dealer on a fair price. The Friends of the Schloss Friedenstein Art Collections in Gotha (e.V.) have recovered further works, most recently the hand-coloured woodcut *Margrave Joachim of Brandenburg* (fig. 11). There have been setbacks with other major objects, such as the copperplate engraving by Master E.S. (fig. 12), which was sold at auction in Bern: despite protests from Gotha and unequivocal media coverage, the pursuit of profit prevailed over moral considerations.



Fig. 9 Jewelled binding of the Codex Aureus of Echternach (c. 690/710), sheet gold (chased), precious stones, pearls, ivory and enamel on oak, spine and back cover silk, 44 x 31.3 cm, Nuremberg, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, inv. no. KG1138

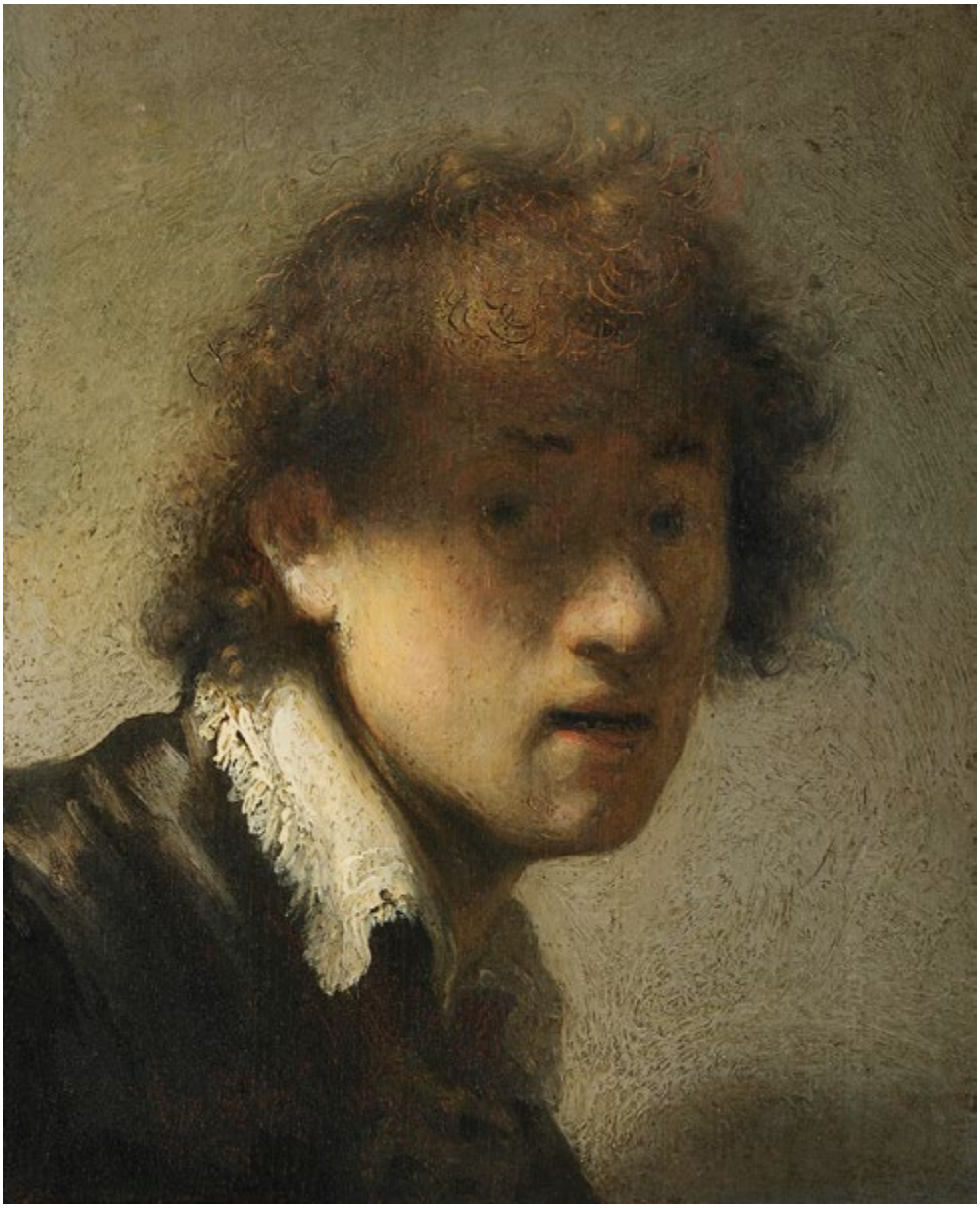


Fig. 10 Rembrandt van Rijn: *Youthful Self-Portrait* (1629), oil on panel, 15.6 x 12.7 cm, Munich, Bavarian State Painting Collections, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 11427



Fig. 11 Michael Ostendorfer (artist, attributed), Hans Guldenmund (engraver): *Margrave Joachim of Brandenburg* (c. 1550), hand-oloured woodcut, 406 x 291 mm, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. no. 38,123

And so, decades after the end of the Second World War, we, the supporters, still stand alongside the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha and help, as best we can, to mitigate the immeasurable losses of this unique collection. We owe a debt of gratitude to the numerous co-sponsors: whenever another Gotha treasure separated from its home appears on the art market, they may groan inwardly for a moment – but they remain willing to work towards yet another repatriation. Restoring the collection's former splendour is likely to take decades – if it can ever be completed.

The Rubens Year begins: the group of five oil sketches shown together for the first time since 1945

The strategy developed by the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha and the EvSK for the Rubens Year has been a spectacular success. Belgium, Rubens's homeland, is also celebrating this achievement with us through the exhibition 'Rubens in Gotha'. It is a story of loss, looted art, art theft and a decades-long search. In 1945 one of the most important groups of works in the Gotha picture gallery was torn apart. Five oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens, once displayed together in the Ducal Museum, were dispersed to various locations after the Second World War. Shortly before the Red Army took



Fig. 12 Master E.S.: *The Annunciation* (c. 1455), engraving, 131 x 111 mm, comparative image from the Städel Museum, Frankfurt, inv. no. 54108

over the US zone from the American forces in July 1945, the ducal family, as mentioned above, had the most valuable works from the Ducal Museum transported to Coburg. Among them were the three most vivid of the five Rubens sketches (cat. 3–5).

The Red Army subsequently took several railway wagons full of artworks from Gotha to the Soviet Union, in violation of international law. Only a few of these works came back, among them two of the Rubens sketches, which were restituted to the GDR in 1958 and have been on display in Gotha again since 1959 (cat. 1–2).

The collection, which had come to include five Rubens sketches by the early 18th century, remained dispersed. Although two works returned to Gotha, the other three found new owners and locations through the American art market. The historic group, a special attraction of the Ducal Museum until the Second World War, survived thereafter only in memory and in the historical inventories of the Gotha collection and its loss catalogues. Thanks to the 'lines of loss' compiled in recent years, it was possible in 2024, with the assistance of Prof. Dr Dirk Boll (Deputy Chairman, 20th/21st Century Art, Christie's), to recover Rubens's sketch *St Gregory of Nazianzus* from the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (cat. 3). Two years later, another return is now being celebrated: *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* (cat. 4). It is the first of the five oil sketches acquired for the princely picture gallery: Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732) had already brought it to Friedenstein, and after 1945 it ended up in a private American collection. Cabinet Turquin (Paris) mediated a fair compromise for its return. As virtually the sole sponsor, the EvSK financed these returns on the basis of the compromises reached.

At the same time, an agreement has now been reached with the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection in Zurich. As a result, the last remaining sketch, *St Augustine*, can now be shown in Gotha on long-term loan (cat. 5).

The EvSK's strategy, launched in 2020, has proved successful. Compiling the scholarly and legal framework (the *Verlustlinien* or 'lines of loss') has made it possible to document the losses in line with the current state of research. This allows Gotha's restitution claims to be both substantiated and specifically raised in acquisition negotiations. The reunion of the five magnificent Rubens sketches, once treasures of the princely picture gallery, is the best evidence of the value of this approach.

welches Detail genau?





Nils Büttner

RUBENS AND THE JESUITS

The historical context

When Peter Paul Rubens was born in 1577, a cruel war had already been raging in his homeland for ten years.[1] Like many others, the Rubens family had fled from their home town of Antwerp to the Free Imperial City of Cologne. When Rubens died in 1640, hardly anyone still had any hope that the war, which had become a world conflagration in 1618, would come to an end eight years later. What went down in the annals of the Holy Roman Empire of the German Nation as the Thirty Years' War was, in the Netherlands, a devastating war lasting 80 years, which ended only in 1648 with the Peace of Westphalia. As part of the Burgundian inheritance, the Netherlands belonged to the dominions of the Spanish king Philip II. His father, Charles V, had been born in Flanders and had ruled an empire on which, as people said, the sun never set. In 1556, he had handed over the Spanish, Netherlandish and Italian possessions to his son Philip and ceded the imperial dignity to his brother Ferdinand I. Philip's uncompromising centralist policy, however, which disregarded the old privileges of the towns and the estates, had considerably aggravated the unrest prevailing in the Netherlands. In addition, there were failed harvests and economic difficulties in the Netherlandish provinces, which owed their wealth to maritime trade. Philip's taxes, which were perceived as unjust, and his rigorous action against the spread of Protestant creeds further inflamed the conflict. Since the Spanish king did not trust his half-sister Margaret, the governor in charge, to solve the problems in the Netherlands, he sent Don Fernando Álvarez de Toledo, Duke of Alba, as the new governor. Alba advanced with a huge army of 10,000 men, made up of Spanish mercenaries, Neapolitans and Germans too, whose quartering and provisioning had to be borne by the already afflicted Netherlandish towns. The powerful city of Antwerp, on whose council Jan Rubens sat, had to justify its policy of the preceding years. When the first council members were arrested and executed,

Jan Rubens, Peter Paul's father, fled and sought refuge in the Catholic imperial city of Cologne, which lay not far from Antwerp on the territory of the Holy Roman Empire, likewise ruled by the Habsburgs, but beyond Alba's reach. It was here that Peter Paul Rubens, later a world-famous painter, received his first schooling.

Schooling

It has been suggested that Rubens acquired his knowledge of Latin at the Gymnasium Tricoronatum, which was run and shaped by the Jesuit order.[2] The institution near the cathedral was not, however, the only Latin school in Cologne. Whichever school Rubens attended, it was under ecclesiastical supervision, and the pupil Peter Paul regularly went to Mass together with his classmates. This did not change after the family had returned to Antwerp following the father's death in 1587. Two years earlier the city had been recaptured by Habsburg troops, and it now became a bulwark of the Counter-Reformation. Catholic faith, as practised in everyday life, shaped society here: the times of Mass structured the day and the feasts of the saints divided up the course of the year. In Antwerp, together with other sons of good society, Rubens attended the Latin school of Rumoldus Verdonk near the cathedral, which on account of its religious orientation was known as the 'papist school' (*Papeschool*).[3]

His parents had not envisaged that their Peter Paul would one day become a world-famous painter. As Rubens's contemporary Joachim von Sandrart plausibly relates in his biographies of artists, his teachers considered the young Rubens 'fit for a future career at the bar [...], not without great joy on the part of his parents.'[4] The career path that his elder brother Philip pursued had been intended for him, too. Like their father, Philip had studied law, had earned his doctorate in Rome and later held the same position in the Antwerp city administration that his father had once occupied.[5] But, as is well known, Peter Paul was to take a different path. He completed his artistic training with three Antwerp painters before being admitted as a master to the Antwerp painters' guild in 1598 and opening his own workshop (fig. 26).[6] By then, different times had dawned in the Netherlands. Philip II, the most powerful king in the world, had detached the Netherlands from the Spanish empire and given them to his daughter Isabella as a gift. Isabella had thus received the 'throne of Flanders', whereby the rulers of the Netherlands were declared sovereigns in their own right.[7] Unlike her ancestor Mary of Burgundy, however, Isabella was not permitted, as a woman, to rule alone. For this she needed, and was given, a husband. Albert had already been governor of the Spanish Netherlands for two years, since 1596. He was the son of Emperor Maximilian II, and in marrying Isabella he

married his cousin, for his mother Maria was the sister of Philip II.
The new rulers were bound to an unconditional profession of the Catholic faith and made Catholic reform a central element of their government. This produced an enormous demand for religious pictures. For besides the reintroduction of Catholic services, the restoration and repair of all damaged churches and altars had already been decreed in 1585. In Antwerp, a front-line Catholic city, there was much for a painter to do, yet in the Holy Year of 1600 Rubens left his native city for a stay of several years in Italy. Whether the opportunity of obtaining in Rome the full remission of the temporal punishment due for sins already forgiven influenced the timing of the journey is not recorded. What is certain is that, even before his departure, Rubens had the prospect of a post as court painter to the Duke of Mantua.[8]

Journey to Italy

Rubens used this stay for an intensive study of ancient (fig. 13) and contemporary art.[9] He drew after ancient works, but also after paintings and sculptures of the High Renaissance, for instance by Raphael and Michelangelo.[10] Rubens is also documented as having made various journeys from Mantua. In the course of these he visited several Italian cities and on one such occasion also met his brother Philip.[11] Philip had belonged to the *Contubernium* of Justus Lipsius, the scholarly and residential community in the household of the renowned Leuven professor. In the autumn of 1601 he had then set out for Italy together with Guillaume Richardot, a son of the famous Jean Richardot, president of the Privy Council of the Habsburg Netherlands.[12] It goes without saying that the wide-ranging contacts of Philip, who was to obtain the degree of doctor of both laws in Rome on 13 June 1603, also benefited Peter Paul Rubens in more than one respect.[13] For he was able not only to profit intellectually from his brother's connections; they were also conducive to his career as a painter. The family connections first came fully into play when Archduke Albert wished to donate a series of altarpieces for the Chapel of St Helena in the famous church of Santa Croce in Gerusalemme in Rome (fig. 14).[14] A suitable painter was therefore found quickly, and Rubens received his first major commission in Rome, while at the same time making a name for himself at the court in Brussels.
In the spring of 1604 Rubens began work on three huge paintings for the Jesuit church in Mantua.[15] It was unquestionably the most important commission that Rubens carried out as court painter in the city, and it gave him occasion for a now lost self-portrait among the attendant figures, for which a preparatory study survives.[16] The court there maintained close ties with the Jesuits – Vincenzo's parents had invited them to settle in their residence city in 1584. From 1586 onwards, a new church was planned, a



Fig. 13 Peter Paul Rubens: *Torso of the Laocoön* (c. 1601–1602), black chalk, 458 x 298 mm, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Kupferstich-Kabinett, inv. no. C 1874-22 a



Fig. 14 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Crowning with Thorns* (1602), oil on panel, 224 x 180 cm, Grasse, Cathédrale Notre-Dame-du-Puy de Grasse

project driven forward and financed above all by Vincenzo's mother, Eleonora of Austria, after her husband's early death. She had stipulated in her will that she be buried in the Jesuits' new church. It should be borne in mind that this religious movement was still young at the time. Only on 4 July 1605 had Pope Paul V granted the long-awaited permission to open the process for the canonisation of Ignatius of Loyola. From an early stage, this process was accompanied by propaganda. The Polish Jesuit Father Mikołaj Łęczycki, in Latin Nicolaus Lancicius, and the rector of the Collegium Germanicum, Father Filippo Rinaldi, then began in Rome to devise a pictorial cycle on the life of Ignatius. Rubens contributed a number of designs to this biographical publication – designs which, engraved by Jean-Baptiste Barbé, were printed as early as the summer of 1606, before the book appeared (fig. 15).[17] In 1622, on the occasion of the canonisation of the order's founder, a new edition of the publication appeared, documenting not only Rubens's early commitment to the order but also his familiarity with the life and work of its founder.[18]



Fig. 15 After Peter Paul Rubens: *'At night he is often beaten by demons while praying or resting'*, in: *Vita Beati P. Ignatii Loiolae*, Rome 1609, pl. 67

In 1606, the high altarpiece executed by Rubens for the Genoese Jesuit church of Sant'Ambrogio, the *Circumcision of Christ*, was also consecrated – a masterpiece that soon made him famous throughout Italy (fig. 16).[19] The crowning achievement of Rubens's career to date was the much-admired commission to create the high altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova, the church of the Oratorians, Santa Maria in Vallicella, one of the most famous and most visited churches in the heart of Rome.[20] Rubens set to work at once, but owing to a change in the theological programme an already completed first version was rejected by the patrons. Rubens created a second version, executed on slate, which can still be seen today in the place for which it was intended. Even before the official inauguration of his pictures for Santa Maria in Vallicella, he found himself, in his own words, 'with one foot in the stirrup', obliged to break camp in Italy at once and set off for



Fig. 16 Peter Paul Rubens: *Circumcision of Christ* (c. 1605), oil on canvas, 492 x 277 cm, Genoa, Chiesa del Gesù e dei Santi Ambrogio e Andrea

home.[21] He had received news of his mother's grave state of health and, although he set out for home immediately, he was not to see her alive again. In his luggage he had a painting honouring her memory, which he had placed over her grave: it was the first version of the high altarpiece for Santa Maria in Vallicella, rejected by the Oratorians, with which he established himself in Antwerp as a painter conversant with the visual language of the High Baroque (fig. 17).[22]

Back in Antwerp

Within a short time, Rubens had achieved international fame, and only a few years after his return from Italy there was hardly a public building in Antwerp that was not adorned with a picture from his hand.[23] Soon after his return he had become *the* the preferred painter of Antwerp's social elite. This applied not only to devout works made in provision for the afterlife and for commemorative practice. Above all in the first ten years after his return from Italy, numerous portraits were created alongside many epitaphs.[24] Rubens's own piety, too, is credibly attested by his nephew and by his early biographers, who report that he attended early Mass in summer and winter alike.[25] For Rubens and his fellow citizens of Antwerp, going to church in the morning was an everyday practice. What this frequently attested fact expresses is more than the rhetorically required reference to the painter's pietas. From today's perspective, the religiosity expressed in it appears to be part of a 'leisure sphere' existing separately from the professional sphere. That, however, would misjudge the reality of an early modern urban community. Religious life was anything but a private matter. Everyday life in 17th-century Antwerp was strongly shaped by religion, and the spirituality that permeated all areas of life also shaped the social and economic life of the city. The community-building function of religious practice was not confined to churches, monasteries and religious confraternities, but also determined relations within the craft guilds and the citizenry as a whole. Besides the written sources on the piety of the painter Rubens, a tangible trace, as it were, of his religiously shaped everyday life also survives. Shortly before his death, on 24 March 1640, he had a Marian Office and a small volume of litanies rebound.[26] He had acquired it some years earlier and used it so regularly that the binding, solid as it was, had to be replaced after only a few years. His so-called *Theoretical Notebook* likewise affords a very personal glimpse into the painter's religious convictions.

The Theoretical Notebook

Even his earliest biographers report that Rubens was not a mere practitioner but a scholar. As proof of this, Giovanni Pietro Bellori, in his biography of the artist published in 1672, states that there was a



Fig. 17 Peter Paul Rubens: *Pope Gregory the Great and Other Saints* (1607–1608), oil on canvas, 477 x 288 cm, Grenoble, Musée de Peinture et de Sculpture

book by his hand 'that contains observations about optics, symmetry, proportion, anatomy, architecture, and a study of the principal affetti and actions drawn from descriptions by poets, with demonstrations of these by painters. There are battles, shipwrecks, games, loves, and other passions and events, transcriptions of some verses of Virgil and others, with comparisons taken mainly from Raphael and the antique.'[27] A comparable summary is given by Roger de Piles in his *Conversations sur la connaissance de la peinture*,[28] who succeeded in tracking down this book in 1676. In 1699 he was then able to report that the manuscript was in his possession.[29] From de Piles's estate the book passed to a collector from Bourges.[30] After his death it was acquired by the royal cabinetmaker André-Charles Boulle, in whose workshop in the Louvre it was destroyed by fire on 30 August 1720.[31] Only a few leaves torn out beforehand survive in the original, but a total of four manuscript copies, two of them based directly on the original, bear witness to the early fame of this collection of images and ideas. The transcripts were 'working copies', in which the copyists made their own selection, omitted material, rearranged what they copied and supplemented it with illustrations and texts they considered appropriate. Nevertheless, these records afford insights into Rubens's view of the world, in which his Christian convictions occupied a central place. That God was the centre of his life he expressed in an unassuming sketch that survives only in

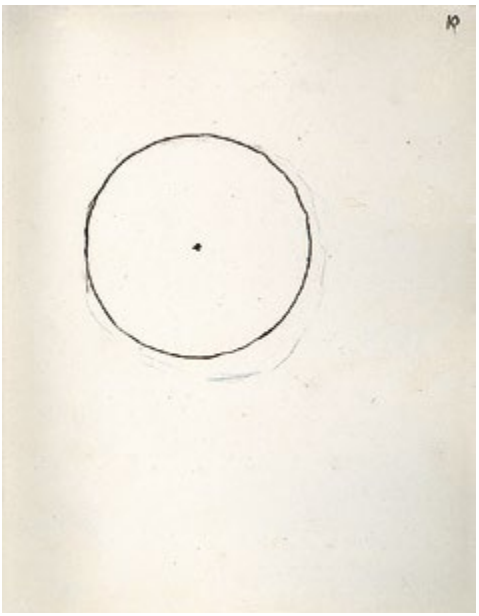


Fig. 18 After Peter Paul Rubens: *Bordes manuscript*, Madrid, Biblioteca Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. D009257, fol. 64r

the so-called Bordes manuscript in the Prado (fig. 18).[32] It is the simplest picture imaginable: a circle drawn with compasses, with its centre marked by a dot. The meaning of the work reveals itself only when one places beside it the page from the *album amicorum* of Rubens's friend and patron Philips van Valkenisse. Shortly before his departure for Italy, Rubens had drawn this emblematic image in his friendship album and added above it the Latin inscription taken from Lucan's *De Bello Civili*, 'Medio Deus omnia campo' – roughly: 'God is everything in the middle of the field' (fig. 19).[33] In his drawing God is not merely a cosmic centre but is at the same time present in every centre. Each individual can there-

fore, from his or her own standpoint as it were, draw a circle around themselves that encompasses the universal divine order. This gives rise to a connection between microcosm and macrocosm: the individual human being, more precisely each individual soul, stands in direct relation to the cosmic order as a whole. This idea is confirmed by a further note in Rubens's *Theoretical Notebook*: there God is described as the 'harmony of all things' and as a circle that encloses everything and outside which nothing exists. God is thus a perfect form that encompasses and permeates the whole of reality. For Rubens, this religious and philosophical world view, deeply rooted in faith, and the firm conviction of God's omnipresence were a certainty of faith that runs like a common thread through his intellectual, artistic and religious life.

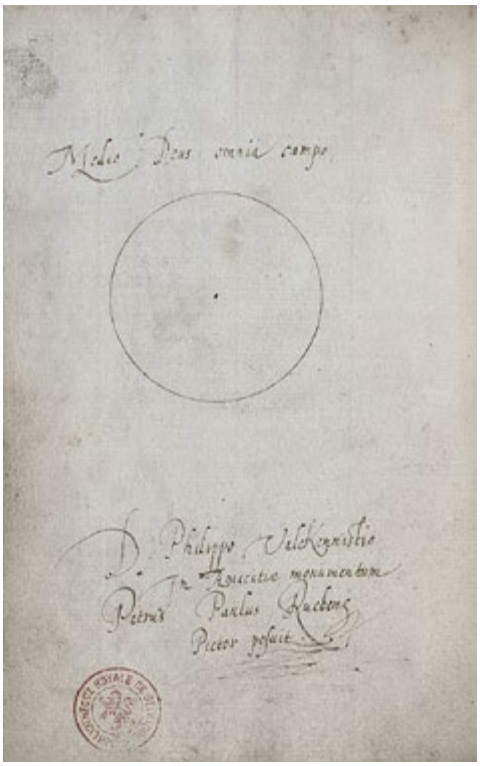


Fig. 19 Philips van Valkenisse: *Album Leaf for Philips van Valkenisse* (c. 1600), Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), ms. II 1688, fol. 127v

Rubens as a book artist

Rubens was perceived by his contemporaries not only as a devout man, but also as a person of polished manners and extraordinary learning. He was not only an avid reader but also took an active part in the design of books himself. In the course of his life Rubens created illustrations and title pages for a total of 58 books, most of them commissioned by, and in exchange with, Balthasar Moretus.[34]

If we are to believe a letter that Moretus sent in 1630, Rubens executed these designs only in his spare time, since on working days he could scarcely spend time on such trifles and would otherwise have to charge 100 guilders for a drawing.[35] This price names a sum whose utopian dimension recalls the legend of Rembrandt's *Hundred Guilder Print*. In reality, Rubens would hardly have charged his friend Moretus such an outrageous amount. Rather, his fees, which were mostly entered only nominally as a basis for offsetting against deliveries of books, lay within the range customary at the time for drawn designs for engrav-

ings.

The publishing house's account books show that between 1624 and 1655 Rubens was credited with 20 guilders for a drawing in folio. In accordance with general convention, the fee was calculated on the basis of the format of the drawings.[36] Accordingly, twelve guilders were charged for a design in quarto, eight for one in octavo and five for a tiny sketch in half-duodecimo format. Measured against the prices he obtained for his paintings at the time, these were hardly significant sums. They show that Rubens took no interest in drawing as an independent form of artistic expression. As part of his fee, Rubens is likely to have received a copy of the book for which he had made the design.[37]

The surviving cash books of the *Officina Plantiniana* record the payments made to Rubens for the book illustrations he produced as well as the books sold to him.[38] In addition, a copy survives of the catalogue of the auction at which, in 1658, the books from the estate of Rubens's eldest son Albert were sold.[39] Albert may already have inherited a large part of the books listed in it from his father, who must at least have owned those bearing handwritten or printed dedications to him. Rubens is also likely to have owned all the books to which he contributed illustrations. With the help of these and other sources it has been possible to reconstruct the painter's extensive library, which also contained a number of Italian works, such as Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata* or the poems of Giovan Battista Marino.

Comparison with other 17th-century book collections shows that the library of the prince of painters was absolutely exceptional in its time. Admittedly, most upper-middle-class households in Antwerp contained more than 30 books, and collections of 200 or more volumes were not uncommon, but with its approximately 500 titles the Rubens library was among the larger book collections in Antwerp.[40] Of course, one cannot know whether a work that appears in a list or is mentioned, say, in correspondence was read page by page by Rubens. Yet despite all doubts, it is at least possible in many cases to establish which books formed part of the extensive library. In connection with his œuvre one can even demonstrate that Rubens – just as happened in the furnishing of his house – purposefully acquired literature on particular subjects with specific projects in mind. His interest, however, was directed not only towards artistic projects and the art of his time, but also towards the study of antiquity, philology and archaeology.

Rubens and the Jesuits

But mathematics and the natural sciences were also among his interests, and here he was in particularly close contact and exchange with Jesuit authors. Beginning with the illustrated life of the order's founder, already mentioned, Rubens designed almost two dozen works by mem-

bers of the Society of Jesus. Since the founding of the Jesuit order, which saw its most important aim in helping as many souls as possible, the Jesuits had regarded books as an important medium of their mission. By the end of the 18th century, Jesuit authors had produced more than 6,000 publications.

An outstanding example of Rubens's activity as a book artist is the title page and the illustrations for a treatise on optics published in 1613 (fig. 22).[41] Franciscus Aguilonius, the rector of the Antwerp Jesuit college, had written his *Opticorum Libri Sex* in support of teachers of the new subject of mathematics. It was Carolus Scribani who in 1606 had applied to the Antwerp city magistrate for permission to open a school of mathematics. It was also to be open to merchants and navigators, so that the city's interests would be served. This school was a main argument in his application to house the college in other, larger premises. In 1608 the college was able to move into the Huis van Liere, and in 1615 Aguilonius, now its rector, was able to open the mathematical school.[42] By this time Rubens had probably already discussed the construction of the new Jesuit church with him, in whose planning he was involved, as will be discussed in the following essay.

Images, no less than texts, played a deliberate and important role in the Jesuit mission. Ignatius of Loyola had already advocated meditation before images at the beginning of the 16th century, and in the course of the Catholic reform that began with the Council of Trent in 1545, images were also deployed as an important medium. Images were to function like a good speech, equally delighting, instructing and emotionally moving their audience, in order to persuade as effectively as possible and to contribute to ethical, moral and religious improvement. Naturally, these aspects were not accentuated with equal weight in every picture. Nevertheless, this rhetorically oriented expectation outlines a contemporary framework within which discourse about images took place. Emblem books, which are based on the close interplay of word and image, are, as it were, a hallmark of this understanding of images and of the period in which it held sway. At the same time, they give an indication of the way images were handled at the time and of the underlying way of thinking. For in emblems, the interplay of text and image merely marks out a framework of definition for the matter intended. Uncovering the relationships between text and image, and the conclusions drawn from them, was left to the audience. Its own intellectual contribution was, in the early modern view, part of the pictorial message. In relation to the work, which was assumed in principle to be ambiguous, the audience had a meaning-creating function.[43] Rubens's religious pictures recall Christ's sacrificial death or the miracles and martyrdom of saints. In churches in particular, they were integrated into liturgy and rite or served contemplation and silent devotion. These cult images, however,



Fig. 20 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Annunciation* (c. 1609), oil on canvas, 224 x 200 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 685

were conceived in composition and content so as to address their audience directly and emotionally. They were thus immediately accessible even to viewers without theological training, and even today, in a secular world virtually flooded with images, they still arouse admiration. This is not only the result of Rubens's virtuoso handling of the formal means of painting, but also the result of a complexity of content that is in no way inferior to the impressive form. Proof of this is provided by the pictorial programme of the Jesuit church, for which Rubens supplied not only the paintings for the high altar but also further altarpieces and, above all, thirty-nine ceiling paintings, which in form and content were among the high points of Jesuit pictorial theology.[44]

Since his return from Italy, Rubens had been particularly closely associated with the Antwerp Jesuits. One of the first paintings Rubens created after returning from Italy in 1608 was for a confraternity attached to the Jesuit college, the *Sodalitas latina major*.[45] Following the Roman model, the Jesuit Father Franciscus Costerus had previously encouraged the founding of Marian congregations in the Netherlands. In 1585 such a Marian sodality had also been established in Antwerp. The members of the *Sodalitas Beatae Mariae Virginis*, all of them married, met

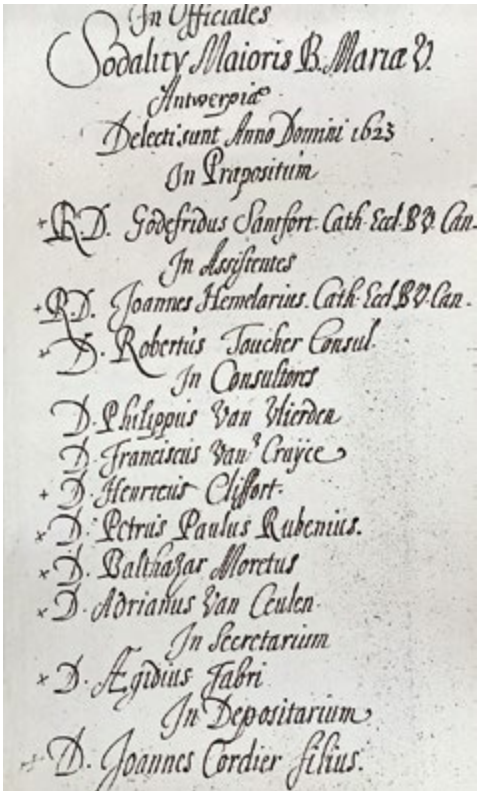

In Officiales
Sodality Maioris B. Mariæ V.
Antwerpiæ
Delecti sunt Anno Domini 1623
In Præpositum
R.D. Godefridus Sanfort Cath. Eccl. B.V. Can.
In Assistentes
R.D. Joannes Hemelarius Cath. Eccl. B.V. Can.
D. Robertus Toucher Consul.
In Consultores
D. Philippus Van Vlierden
D. Franciscus Van Craÿce
D. Henricus Clifford.
D. Petrus Paulus Rubenius.
D. Balthazar Moretus
D. Adrianus Van Ceulen
In Secretarium
D. Ægidius Fabri
In Depositarium
D. Joannes Cordier filius.

Fig. 21 *Liber Magistratus Sodalitatis Latina Maioris Antwerpiae*, Anno Domini 1623

regularly in a house in the Korte Nieuwstraat. In 1609, however, this confraternity split into a Latin sodality and a *duytsche* (German) one, which brought together all those who spoke only Dutch and had no classical education. Presumably it was precisely this foundation of the *Sodalitas latina major* that prompted the commission to Rubens for a depiction of the Annunciation (fig. 20).[46] At that time it was placed in the lower oratory of the Antwerp Jesuit college. In 1623 Rubens became *Consultor* of the Latin association (fig. 21),[47] to which, naturally, other respected members of the Antwerp elite also belonged, such as Balthasar Moretus, Jan Brant or Rubens's friend and patron Nicolaas Rockox. When it came to finding a suitable painter for the pictorial decoration of the new Jesuit church, the choice naturally fell on Rubens.

Notes

1 For the historical context and an overview of the painter's biography, cf. Büttner 2026.
2 Nebelung 2016.
3 Büttner 2006, p. 28.
4 Sandrart 1675 [II, 3], p. 290.
5 Büttner 2026, pp. 52–62.
6 Antwerp, FelixArchief, 2574#70 (Sint Lucasgilde, 1. Liggere 1453–1616), fol. 159v: 'Peeter Rubbens, vrymeester, scilder'; Büttner 2006, p. 33.
7 Büttner 2026, pp. 191–210.
8 Nils Büttner, in: Büttner/Orlando 2022, pp. 26–33.
9 On Rubens in Rome, cf. Holger Jacob-Friesen, in: Büttner/Diefenthaler 2021, pp. 119–138.
10 On Rubens and antiquity, most recently cf. Veronika Korbei, in: Büttner/Diefenthaler 2021, pp. 139–156.
11 Rooses/Ruelens 1887–1909, I, p. 38.
12 Büttner 2026, pp. 54–55.
13 Génard 1877, pp. 353–357.
14 De Maeyer 1955, pp. 94–95; CRLB VIII, nos. 110–112.
15 CRLB IV-1, pp. 23–169, nos. 1–3.
16 CRLB IV-1, pp. 129–135, nos. 1–10b.
17 Bertram/Büttner 2018, pp. 36–39, no. 1.
18 Büttner/Watteeuw 2023a, pp. 92–101.
19 CRLB V-1, pp. 102–107, no. 21.
20 CRLB IV-1, pp. 23–169, nos. 1–3.
21 Rooses/Ruelens 1887–1909, I, p. 428: 'Salendo a cavallo.'
22 CRLB VIII, no. 109. Characteristic is the inscription placed beneath the picture: 'MATRI-VIRGINI, hanc tabulam à se pictam, de suo ornatam, pio affectu ad opt.[imæ] matris sepulcrum commune cum vxore ISABELLA BRANT sua sibi die PETRVS PAVLVS RVBENS L.[ibens] M.[erito] D.[edit] Ipso D.[edicavitque] Michaelis MICHAELIS ARCHANGELI, Anno M. DCX.' Sweerts 1613, p. 144.
23 'Peeter Rubbens, tis een goet meester die de god vande schilders is genaempt', wrote Jan le Grand to his correspondent Lieven vuytten Eeckhout on 12 March 1611: 'Hij heeft hier diversche stucken gemaeckt die in groot extime gehouden worden als namelijck opt Stadthuys, tot Sinte Michiels, Preeckheren- ende Borchtkerk, die fray syn.' Monballieu 1965, pp. 195–196.
24 On Rubens as a painter of epitaphs, cf. CRLB VI, CRLB VII and CRLB VIII; on the portraits, CRLB XIX.
25 Reiffenberg 1834, p. 10; De Piles 1677, pp. 213–214.
26 Arents 2001, pp. 53, 206, nos. E212, E213.
27 Bellori 2020, p. 113. The English translation following A.S. Wohl and H. Wohl, eds, *Giovanni Pietro Bellori. The Lives of the Modern Painters, Sculptors and Architects. A New Translation and Critical Edition*, Cambridge 2005,
28 De Piles 1677, p. 219: 'J'en ay veu un livre de sa main fait de cette manière; *ou les demonstrations & les discours étoient ensemble*. Il y avoit des observations sur l'Optique, *sur les lumieres & les ombres*, sur les proportions, sur l'Anatomie & sur l'Architecture, avec une recherche tres-curieuse des principal passions de l'ame, & des actions tirées de quelques descriptions qu'en ont fait les Poëtes, avec des demonstrations *à la plume* d'après les meilleurs Maistres & principalment d'aprés Raphaël, *pour faire valoir la Peinture des uns par la Poësie des autres (soit que ces habilles Peintres eussent travaillé par principe, ou seulement par bonté de leur genie)*. Il y a des batailles, des tempestes, des jeux, des amours, *des supplices, des morts differentes*, & des autres semblables passions & évenements, *dont il s'e voyoit quelquesuns qu'il avoit dessinez* d'aprés l'Antique.' The passages in italics were added to the Bellori quotation by de Piles.
29 De Piles 1699, pp. 166, 403: 'l'original est entre mes mains'. According to de Piles, Rubens dedicated the original of his *Theoretical Notebook* to Antonio de Tassis (1584–1651) and may have given it to him; a letter from Jean-Michel Picart to Matthijs Musson of 24 January 1676 states: 'During his life-

time Rubens wrote down the rules of painting in his own hand in the Latin language and gave them to Canon Tassis' (Denucé 1949, p. 432). No inventory of the estate of Canon Antoon Tassis (d. 11 May 1651) is known.

30 Bonnaffé 1884, p. 38.

31 Mariette 1851–60, I, p. 187.

32 *Bordes Manuscript*, Madrid, Biblioteca Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. D009257, fol. 64r.

33 *Album Amicorum*, Brussels, Royal Library of Belgium (KBR), ms. II 1688, fol. 127v; Muller 1982, pp. 220–225.

34 CRLB XXI; Bertram/Büttner 2018.

35 Rooses/Ruelens 1887–1909, V, p. 335: 'Theses Theologicas accepi, quas eleganter et cito excusas curabo. At de imaginibus laboro quî absolvantur. Rubenius delineare eas recusat, nisi ad trimestre delineatio differri possit. Et solet fere à me praemoneri sex mensibus, ut titulum aliquem meditetur, et describat cum plenissimo otio, et diebus fere sacris: nam profanos operi tali haud impendit; aut centum florenos pro unica delineatione exigeret.'

36 Bertram 2018, pp. 32–55.

37 Bertram 2018, p. 163.

38 Arents 2001, nos. E1–213.

39 Arents 2001, pp. 339–366.

40 Frans Baudouin, in: Arents 2001, pp. 68–75.

41 CRLB XXI, nos. 10–16; Bertram/Büttner 2018, no. 4.

42 Bertram 2016, pp. 212–242.

43 Büttner 2014, pp. 96–146.

44 Cf. Büttner/Watteeuw 2023b, as well as the following essay.

45 CRLB V-1, no. 1.

46 Büttner/Watteeuw 2023a, pp. 92–101.

47 Büttner 2006, p. 44.



Nils Büttner

THE ANTWERP JESUIT CHURCH AND ITS PAINTED DECORATION

Rubens, Aguilonius and Huyssens

The truce concluded in 1609 with the seven northern provinces of the Netherlands offered the prospect of economic recovery after long years of war. Cultural and economic life did indeed begin to revive, and the Jesuits enjoyed a growing following. In 1613, the fifth year of the truce, Antwerp approached the General of the Order in Rome with the wish to build a new professed house and a new church.[1] Claudio Acquaviva looked favourably on the request and approved a new building, provided that functionality and an appropriate and, in particular, not overly lavish, design were observed.

From the outset, all the planning lay in the hands of Franciscus Aguilonius, vice-rector of the college, who worked with the experienced architect Pieter Huyssens and is already named as *architectus* in the records of the Antwerp professed house in 1613.[2] In that same year the Officina Plantiniana also published Aguilonius's *Opticorum Libri Sex*, a particularly lavish edition on mathematics (fig. 22).[3] With this book Aguilonius sought to lay a foundation for the Jesuits' teaching of mathematics and optics and to establish optics as an independent and particularly important mathematical science. At the same time, the work was intended to show that scientific knowledge – and above all seeing – is connected with reason and ultimately with the knowledge of God. The painter Rubens, who was interested in precisely these subjects, translated this aim into an equally compelling visual language.[4] This applies both to the title page and to the vignettes placed at the head of the individual sections of the book, in which a scholar is assisted in his optical experiments by winged putti.[5] In view of this collaboration, it seems likely that Rubens and Aguilonius also exchanged ideas about the planned new Jesuit church, even if no sources survive that prove this beyond doubt. It is, however, quite likely that Aguilonius and Huyssens turned to Rubens, who, unlike them, had seen and studied the order's mother church in

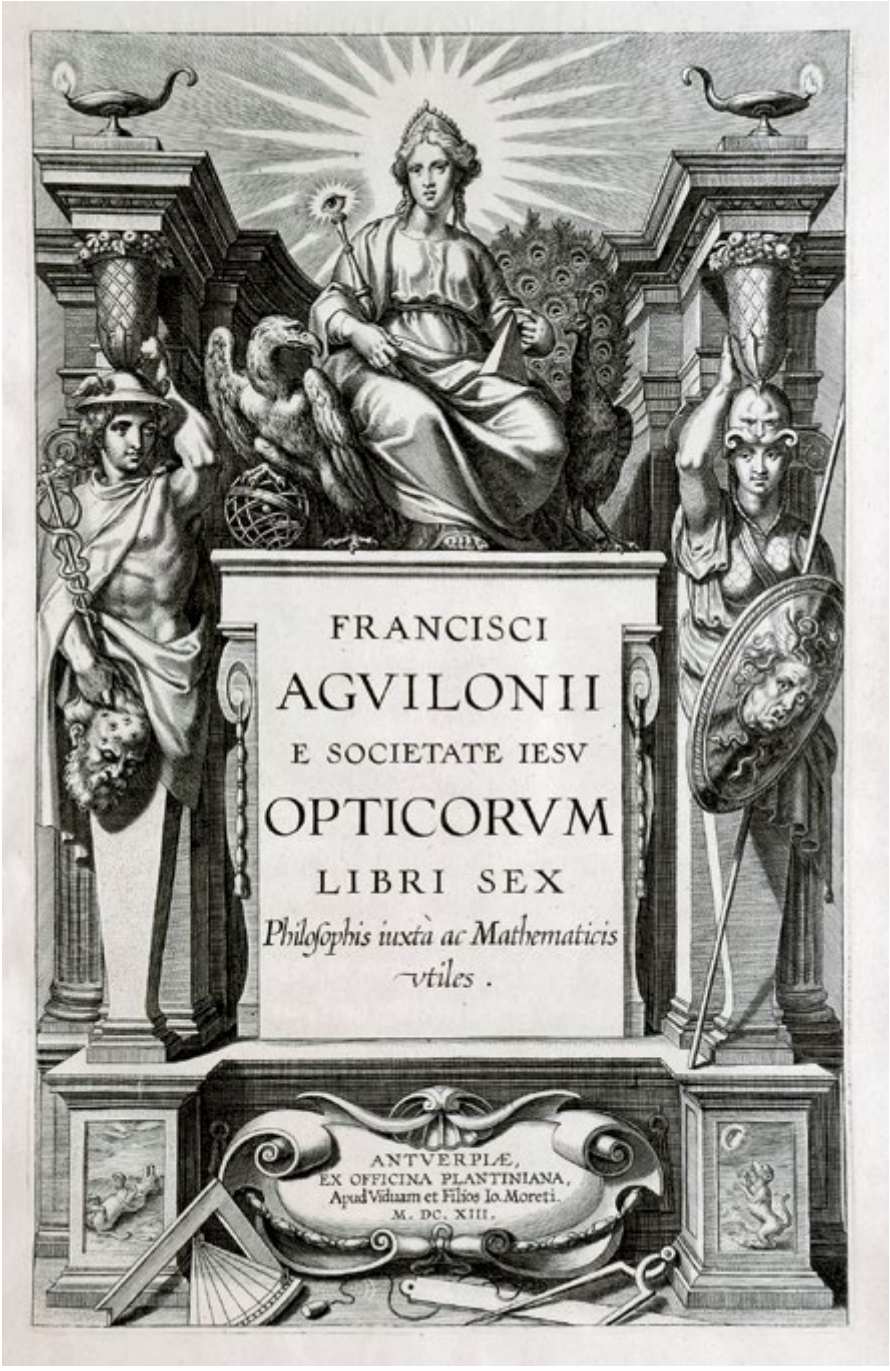


Fig. 22 Theodor Galle after Peter Paul Rubens: title page for Franciscus Aguilonius, *Opticorum Libri Sex*. Antwerp: Officina Plantiniana (1613), engraving, 314 x 194 mm

Rome with his own eyes. For neither Aguilonius nor Huyssens had ever been to Italy. The two planners had a well-stocked library and evidently also views and plans of the mother church of the Jesuit order, the Chiesa del Santissimo Nome di Gesù all'Argentina. The church, generally known simply as Il Gesù, had been designed by Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola, architect to the Farnese family, and the architect and sculptor Giacomo della Porta. The façade of the building, consecrated in 1584, is regarded as the founding work of the Baroque style in architecture and became the model for the Antwerp complex with regard to both the ground plan and the façade. Comparing Il Gesù and the Antwerp church, one is immediately struck by the related three-part façade with its superimposition of three orders of columns. Both buildings also feature the conspicuous paired and single columns which, like the pilasters, share a common plinth without bases of their own. Above all, however, the two churches are linked by the motif of the mighty volutes which, leaning against the central section of the façade, conceal the roof zone of the side chapels of the nave. Yet despite this clear borrowing, the Antwerp church, with a design entirely attuned to the proportions of the square and the surrounding architecture, is as effective as it is independent.

Two pictures for the high altar

On 15 April 1615, the foundation stone of the new complex of church and professed house was laid.[6] The Antwerp city authorities must have given their consent to the project beforehand, and on 13 January 1616, the plenary assembly of the city council, the so-called *Breede Raad*, even declared its readiness to support the project with 4,000 guilders a year for an assumed duration of five years.[7] To this were added the donations of wealthy citizens, men and women, and further contributions. All the costs incurred in connection with the new building, its construction, furnishing and maintenance for the period from 15 April 1614 to 31 December 1628 are recorded in a cash book that survives to this day.[8] In it Rubens is mentioned for the first time on 13 April 1617, when the Jesuits owed him 3,000 guilders for an unspecified purpose.[9] This sum was intended as payment for the two paintings that Rubens had created for the high altar of the church.[10] He had first created oil sketches of the planned compositions, which could be submitted to the patrons for approval.

As a rule, Rubens asked for the designs to be returned after they had been approved, regarding them as workshop material that could be reused when a suitable occasion arose.[11] In the case of the pictures for the high altar of the Jesuit church, things were different. Together with the finished altarpieces, Rubens also handed over to the Jesuits the oil



Fig. 23 Peter Paul Rubens: oil sketch for *The Miracles of St Ignatius of Loyola* (c. 1615–1616), oil on panel, 105 x 74 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 517



Fig. 24 Peter Paul Rubens: oil sketch for *The Miracles of St Francis Xavier* (c. 1616–1617), oil on panel, 104.5 x 72.5 cm, Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum, inv. no. 528

sketches submitted for their execution, which were integrated into the religious decoration and pictorial didactics of the church.[12] The two pictures, which survive to this day, show the miracles of St Ignatius of Loyola and those worked by St Francis Xavier.[13] The two altarpieces – later joined by paintings from other artists – were displayed in alternation over the course of the church year, an ingenious mechanism, that still works today making it possible to exchange the huge pictures within the stone frame of the altar. The two preparatory sketches (figs 23 and 24) were displayed on the piers of the choir,[14] so that visitors could compare the original design with the executed version, as one of the painted interior views of the church shows (fig. 25).[15] At the same time, the sketches made the two most important saints venerated in the church permanently visible in a particularly prominent place. Fortunately, Rubens's large altarpieces happened to be lowered into the recess when a devastating fire following a lightning strike on 18 July 1718 consumed the magnificent decoration of the church. Like

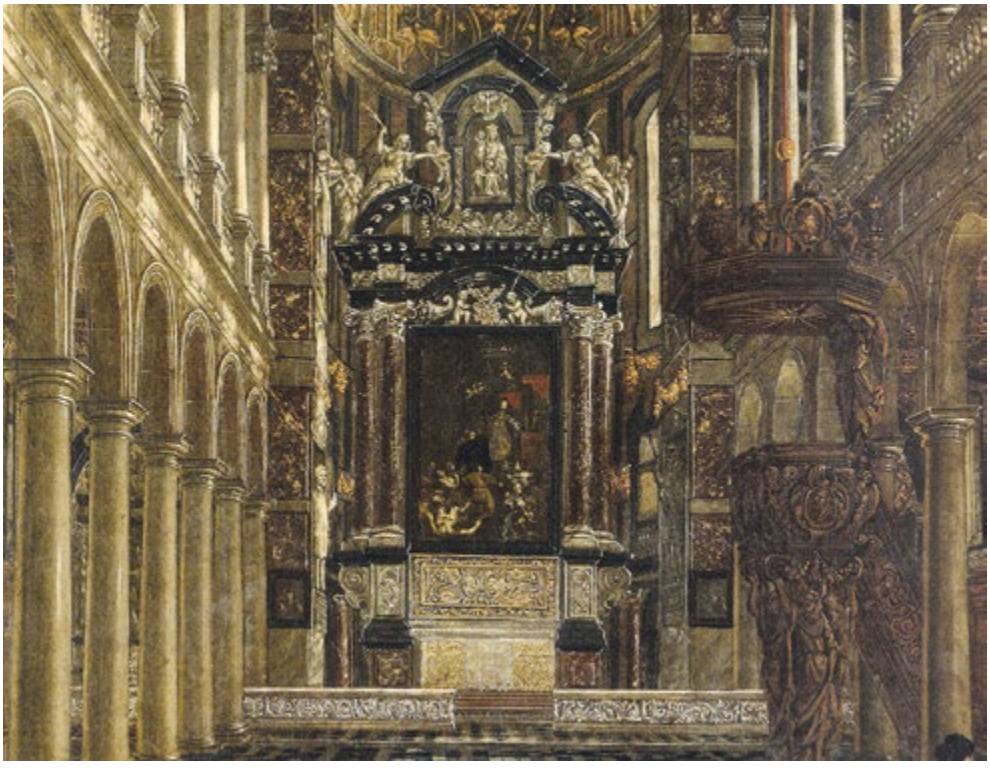


Fig. 25 Wilhelm Schubert van Ehrenberg: *Interior of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp* (detail; c. 1670), oil on canvas, 105 x 90 cm, 's-Hertogenbosch, Het Noordbrabants Museum, inv. no. 14674

the sketches, which had at that time been moved elsewhere, they escaped the blaze. But the once-admired church suffered terrible losses not only through the fire, but also through the suppression of the order decreed by Pope Clement XIV in 1773. After the dissolution of the Jesuit order in 1773, the sketches and the two Rubens paintings were acquired by Empress Maria Theresa for the imperial collection in Vienna. At that time the church, which today serves as an ordinary parish church, was also reconsecrated and given the dedication to St Charles Borromeo, whose name it still bears. But back to Rubens.

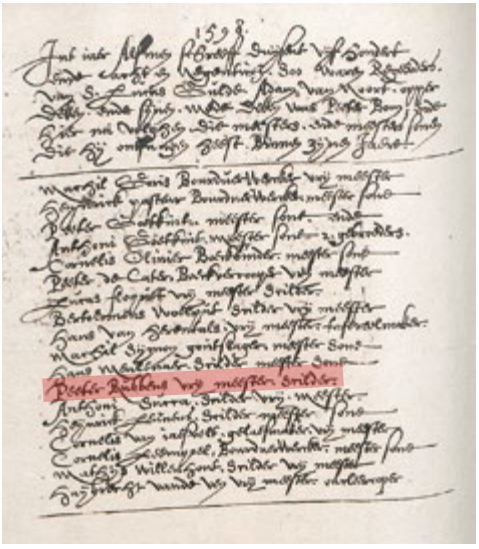


Fig. 26 Extract from the membership register of the Guild of St Luke (1st Liggere, 1453–1616), fol. 159v, Antwerp, FelixArchief

Rubens's workshop practice

The oil sketches executed in oil on panel, in which Rubens tested and prepared commissions on a small scale, occupy a central place in his œuvre. Above all in the years after his return from Italy, they became a central working basis in a steadily growing workshop. Collaborative working was not Rubens's invention. The practice had a tradition in Antwerp reaching back to the 15th century, and Rubens had become acquainted with it early on. Only from indirect sources do we know who Rubens's teachers were. He probably began his training with the landscape painter Tobias Verhaecht, a relative of his mother. He is then said to have worked with Adam van Noort, who was much sought after as a teacher, before completing his training with the Leiden-born painter Otto van Veen. On 18 October 1598, the then senior dean, Adam van Noort, recorded among the newly admitted free masters in the *Liggeren* 'Peter Rubens, free master, painter' (fig. 26).[16] This entry in the membership register of the Guild of St Luke is the first documentary evidence of Rubens's activity as a painter. In the period after he became a master, his first portraits were painted alongside his first mythological pictures.[17] A series of what were once 18 portraits of Roman emperors, eleven of which survive in Stuttgart and a further one in Antwerp, can also be dated clearly to this period.[18] These imperial portraits are not only eloquent testimonies to the history of taste, but also important sources for Rubens's early career and his workshop practice, since

various painters were evidently involved in their execution.[19] There is also evidence of collaborative working from the period of his stay in Italy; for example, a painting created there was prepared by an assistant from Flanders in a manner typical of Antwerp.[20] Further evidence is the fact that, long after his return to Antwerp, Rubens confirmed that the painter Deodat Delmonte had served him faithfully throughout his journey in Italy.[21] When Rubens returned home from Italy to Antwerp at the end of 1608, the first artistic commissions were already awaiting him. Soon after his return he was also appointed court painter to the Archdukes, which brought him numerous commissions and a fixed annual salary.[22]

As the number of commissions grew, so did the number of collaboratively produced pictures, Rubens produced hardly any of his more than 1,800 paintings entirely on his own. How many pupils and assistants Rubens actually had cannot be determined with certainty, since as court painter to the Archdukes he was exempt from the obligation to register his pupils with the guild.[23] From the most varied sources – Rubens's letters, for instance, or the accounts of the lives of those painters whose biographers described them, to enhance their fame, as apprentices, journeymen or assistants of Rubens – we know the names of some hundred painters who were more or less closely associated with the Rubens workshop for shorter or longer periods.[24] Opinions differ as to the extent to which these numerous assistants were involved in the production of paintings.

How sought after his workshop was as a place of training is documented by a letter dated 11 May 1611 to the engraver Jacob de Bie, who had put in a word for a young man eager to learn from the famous painter. Rubens wrote that he had already had to turn away hundreds who had applied for an apprenticeship.[25] Rubens probably only took on pupils once they had completed the first part of their training with other artists. This simplified their induction and encouraged the assimilation to his style that he desired. By this time at the latest, Rubens was running a tightly organised, highly productive workshop, from whose orbit more than a hundred pupils and assistants are known by name.[26]

At home with Rubens

Rubens's emphasis on the design stage in all his projects was motivated not only by practical considerations but also by a concern for his social standing. In the courtly society of the day, work and nobility were mutually exclusive. And since the noble life was held up as the ideal, Rubens always took care not to appear as a diligent labourer. This is attested by the travel account of a Hamburg student who came to Antwerp in 1621 as a member of a travelling party on an educational journey. In his diary, written up later, he describes the encounter with the famous painter:

'We also visited the far-famed and most skilful painter Rubbens, whom we found at his work, and at the same time having Tacitus read aloud to him and dictating a letter to another. And as we kept silent and did not wish to hinder him by talking, he himself began to speak with us, and yet all the while continued with his work, had himself read to, and did not leave off dictating the letter and answering us, whereby he wished to show us his great genius. Afterwards he had one of his servants lead us all about his splendid palazzo and show us his antiquities and his Greek and Roman statues, of which he had a great quantity. There we also saw a great hall which had no windows, but the light fell into it from above through a great hole in the middle of the hall. In this hall sat many young pupils, all working on different pieces, which had first been drawn out for them in chalk by Mr Rub-bens, with a patch of colour added here and there. These paintings the young fellows had to work up fully in colour, until at last Mr Rübbens himself perfected everything with strokes and colours. Thus, it was then said that all was Rübbens's work, whereby the man has gathered exceeding great riches and has been endowed by kings and princes with great gifts and jewels.'[27]

The travelling student noticed Rubens's self-staging for what it was and described it aptly. The practice described by the student, Otto Sperling, – making small designs after which the large paintings were executed with the help of the workshop – is attested many times over, not only by numerous reports but above all by the surviving works.[28] In the case of the decoration of the Jesuit church it is even guaranteed by contract.

The contract

In a contract concluded with the Jesuits on 29 March 1620, Rubens undertook to decorate the ceilings of the aisles and galleries with a total of 39 paintings within a year (fig. 27).[29] The painter undertook to deliver to his patrons thirty-nine paintings for the galleries of the church 'as quickly as possible, but at the latest before the end of the current year or at the beginning of the coming year'.[30] Eighteen pictures with scenes from the Old and New Testaments were to be created for the ceilings of the upper galleries. A total of twenty-one depictions of saints were to be installed above the walkways on the ground floor. With the contract, the painter was handed a list of subjects, the patrons reserving the right to change these wherever it seemed useful to them. The then forty-three-year-old Rubens had thus taken on the largest commission of his career to date, for which – including the money for the paintings of the high altar – he was to be paid the unheard-of sum of ten thousand guilders. In addition, the contract stipulated that Rubens was obliged to execute the designs himself:

'All the aforementioned thirty-nine pieces shall be executed by his own hand in

small, and worked up and completed in large by van Dyck and others of his pupils, as the placing of the pieces and the respective places in which they are to be installed shall require.'[31]

The 'teekeninge' mentioned in the contract are in fact not drawings, but the oil sketches already referred to. They differ in format and degree of finish and were evidently produced at different stages of the design process. A relatively early stage is represented by grisaille sketches such as the depictions of St Barbara and St Clare intended for the ground floor, now in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. They are executed on tiny wooden panels measuring only about fifteen by twenty centimetres. A total of nine such sketches survive, executed solely with the brush in brown paint, indicating the outlines of the composition. A few lights are then added in a little lead white, making the lighting and modelling apparent. With the most minimal means, pictures were created in this way in which the composition becomes clear. Rubens then worked up the first designs laid out in these pictures in more detailed oil sketches. In their material basis they correspond to the small grisaille sketches. They are executed on thin oak boards primed with a mixture of chalk, lead white and animal glue. This whitish ground was then covered with a first, very thin, translucent layer of paint. Only a few black pigments were added to this so-called imprimatura, so that the silvery, shimmering coating looks streaky. The broad brushstrokes used to apply this thin layer of paint are clearly visible.[32] On the grisaille sketch for *The Coronation of the Virgin* in Rotterdam (fig. 28) one can see clearly how hastily the imprimatura was applied in broad strokes, and can also tell that each small panel was given its own.[33] That the small sketches were not all executed on one large panel that was only cut up afterwards is also made clear by differences in colouring and style. On close inspection, the imprimatura can be seen on the considerably larger oil sketches executed in colour, such as the depiction of St Athanasius in Gotha (cat. 1).[34] As the contract required, Rubens evidently took care to adapt the designs of the place where the paintings were to be installed.



Fig. 27 Wilhelm Schubert van Ehrenberg: *The Interior of the Antwerp Jesuit Church* (1668), oil on marble, 97.5 x 103 cm, Antwerp, Rubenshuis, inv. no. RH.S.189

The sketches executed in colour were mostly two to three times as large as the



Fig. 28 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Coronation of the Virgin* (c. 1620–1621), oil on panel, 17.5 x 28.6 cm, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, inv. no. 2416 (OK))

grisailles and were not intended merely to try out the compositions. Rather, they were also meant to be submitted to the patrons, who could check compliance with their requirements on the oil sketches before the final work was executed. Within Rubens's workshop the master's sketches served another important purpose, for they made an efficient workflow possible and functioned as visual working instructions for the assistants.

The large-format paintings, now lost, were executed on canvases supplied by the Jesuits, as stipulated in the contract. They were five to ten times as large as the sketches and actually measured about twelve square metres. How far Anthonis van Dyck and the other assistants were supported by Rubens himself in bringing the designs to their final format can no longer be said with certainty today. It can be assumed, however, that he lent a hand himself at least in those cases in which the executed picture departed markedly from the preceding designs. That happened not at all rarely. Only nine of the surviving sketches correspond to the paintings ultimately executed, as far as can be judged by comparison with the copy drawings produced after the original paintings in the church. Whether Rubens created a small grisaille study and a more fully worked-up oil sketch for every motif cannot be said, for by no means all the designs have survived.

Only six grisaille sketches still exist altogether, of which twelve more were still documented in the 18th century. At that time nine further colour sketches also still existed, which have not resurfaced to this day. In addition, twenty-six colour oil sketches exist in which the required thirty-nine pictures were prepared. Rubens, however, produced far more designs, since the iconographic programme was evidently still being changed after he had long since begun work. Thus, Rubens designed forty-two pictures in all, three of which were never executed. For these, two grisaille sketches and two colour sketches had been created that were never executed on a large scale. Only five of the surviving grisailles and twenty-three of the colour oil sketches in all show paintings that were once to be seen in the Jesuit church, among them the sketches from Gotha.

The pictorial programme

If one wants to understand the pictorial programme, and also the reasons why certain paintings were abandoned, one has to rely, besides the written sources, above all on other visual sources. The painted views of the interior make it difficult to recognise the individual pictures. The drawings by Christian Daniel Müller, the reproductions by Jacob de Wit and Rubens's surviving oil sketches, however, make it possible to reconstruct the former pictorial programme. Another important source is the description of the church's decoration by Jan Baptist van Caukercken, written around 1700, which allows an exact reconstruction of the sequence of pictures.[35] In addition, various painted interior views of the church document the former effect of the interior, even if these perspectivally-staged paintings make it difficult to recognise the individual pictures.

The cycle, realised by Rubens in consultation with the Jesuits, began at the top of the ceiling of the left, northern gallery at the east end with a picture of the *Fall of the Angels*. Starting at the altar, visitors were intended to follow the sequence of paintings, first encountering *The Fall of the Rebel Angels*, then *The Adoration of the Shepherds*, *The Queen of Sheba before Solomon*, *The Adoration of the Magi*, *David and Goliath*, *The Temptation of Christ*, *Abraham and Melchizedek*, *The Last Supper* and finally *Moses between Aaron and Hur*. After that one continued to the southern gallery and walk along it, again from east to west. Beginning with *The Raising of the Cross*, there followed *The Sacrifice of Isaac*, *The Resurrection of Christ*, *The Triumph of Joseph in Egypt*, *The Ascension of Christ*, *The Ascension of Elijah* (cat. 4), *The Assumption of the Virgin*, *Esther before Ahasuerus* and finally *The Coronation of the Virgin*. The individual pictures were related to one another in the sense of typology.[36] This term describes a hermeneutic reading of the Bible in which events, persons or statements of the Old Testament are regarded as types, to which New Testament events are related as antitypes. The principle is

already applied in the Bible itself, when, for instance, the Gospel of John (John 3:14) establishes a connection between the raising of the brazen serpent described in the Fourth Book of Moses (Numbers 21:8–9) and the Crucifixion of Jesus. Another particularly widespread juxtaposition, which Rubens also depicted, was *The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, King of Jerusalem*, described in the Book of Genesis (Genesis 14:17–20). Abraham, returning from a military campaign, was received by Melchizedek with bread and wine. As early as the late antique Canon Missae, this frequently depicted scene was understood as a typological reference to the Eucharist and as a prefiguration of the Last Supper. In the course of the planning it was decided, contrary to the first plans and in order to have an equal number of scenes from the Old and the New Testament, to replace the depiction of the Annunciation with that of the Nativity with the Adoration of the Shepherds. It can be assumed that Rubens was involved in the discussion about the design of the pictorial programme. For he clearly succeeds in making the theological references visually comprehensible. By painterly means he managed to organise the semantic units through the formal composition of the pictures, to direct the viewer's gaze and thus to guide the reading of the pictures. The pictures are also likely to have impressed people who did not immediately understand all the references to salvation history or did not know all the saints depicted.

On entering the church, one first saw three paintings located beneath the organ gallery. Like the eighteen paintings in the aisles, they were devoted to individual saints. The four Latin and Greek Fathers of the Church were planned for the ceilings of the aisles, as well as eight female saints (cat. 1–5).[37] The picture of *St Athanasius* formed the start of a series of nine pictures in all. They followed one another continuously from east to west, beginning at an altar dedicated to St Francis Xavier. The pictures of the Fathers of the Church expressed the claim of the Society of Jesus to be the guardian and champion of the true Catholic doctrine and Church. Jesuit theologians had indeed made a decisive contribution to dogmatic teaching and to the understanding of Christianity in their commentaries on the Fathers of the Church and in other writings. From this arose the claim expressed in the pictures to continue the struggle waged by the saints and martyrs of earlier times and to bring it to a victorious conclusion. In his pictures of saints, too, Rubens proves to be exceptionally innovative. He depicted, for example, a number of saints for whom there was no established iconographic pattern in Western art, such as *St Basil*, who succeeded Eusebius as Bishop of Caesarea. But even where established pictorial traditions already existed, Rubens's formulations depart from them in a highly original way. Thus his depictions of both *St Jerome* and *St Gregory the Great* are highly unusual, since they show the protagonists in an extreme foreshortening dictated by the location. In the picture of

Athanasius, a Doctor of the Church and Patriarch of Alexandria, Rubens helps the viewer with a banderole on which the letters *ATHANAS* can be read.[38] The banderole not only refers to the name of the figure depicted, but is also the God-sent sign of his victory. In his right hand he holds the crozier. He appears as a victor in the truest sense of the word, for he sets his foot on the heretic Arius, whom he has overcome and who had claimed that Christ was not true God. Athanasius fought against this heresy and its adherents, vehemently defending the understanding of the Trinity agreed at the Council of Nicaea in 325. Even viewers without theological training are likely to have been moved by the effect of this painting, which illusionistically extends the built space.
The depictions designed by Rubens were all conceived from a steep view from below, known as *di sotto in su*. It was precisely this spectacular foreshortening that the Jesuit Father Michael Grisius praised in his description of the church as early as 1622:

'It is remarkable that the master has depicted the figures larger than life in foreshortened or ascending perspective in so short a time, and with such great artistry that his equal has not yet been found in this country.'[39]

Rubens had sought out and practised these perspectives as a young painter, for instance when he drew after a plaster cast of a sculpture by the sculptor Willem van Tetrode.[40] In the sketches for the pictures of the Jesuit church, Rubens took these foreshortenings to extremes and created a repertoire of figures that he was also able to reuse in other contexts. At the same time, in his depiction of the Prophet Elijah carried off to heaven by fiery horses, for example, he challenged established pictorial traditions. Where others showed a stationary wheel with spokes, Rubens was the first artist to paint a rapidly spinning wheel in a painting whose spokes are no longer visible because of motion blur.[41] With a few shimmering brushstrokes, expressive lines of movement here illustrate the sparking wheels. It is the motion blur in the depiction of the furiously spinning wheels of the chariot. To visualise the dynamic movement, Rubens set down only a few yellow strokes to suggest the spokes of the wheel, made invisible by its rotation.[42] Apart from Leonardo da Vinci's drawings, which remained unpublished until the 20th century, this is the first representation of the visual phenomenon of motion blur and the first evidence of its depiction in the medium of painting. That the paintings, too, showed this remarkable effect, never before depicted in this way in painting, is proven by the drawings by de Wit already mentioned and by the prints created after them.

The significance of the oil sketches

The oil sketches were valuable workshop resources, as they could be used to make copies or reproductions of existing com-

positions, or to develop variations on the basis of established designs. Rubens himself valued them so highly that he was prepared to pay a considerable price to retain them. Father Tirinus had had a clause included in the contract that obliged Rubens, at his own expense, 'to supply a further painting for one of the four side altars of the said church' or, instead, 'all the thirty-nine small oil sketches named above'.[43] Rubens chose to supply a further altarpiece and created the *Assumption of the Virgin* now in Vienna, which also survived the fire, suffering only minor damage.

In the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, where the preparatory oil sketches can still be compared directly with the executed paintings, it becomes vividly apparent what is special about Rubens's oil sketches. They are direct testimonies to Rubens's artistic thinking. They reveal the astonishing freedom and speed with which Rubens condensed forms, colours and movements. The open brushwork, the fluid and in part transparent application of paint and the deliberate restriction to what is essential for the overall effect make the oil sketches the most direct evidence of his artistic practice. His Jesuit contemporaries appreciated these qualities and were, in a sense, ahead of their time, for it was only long after the artist's death that an appreciation developed for sketches created in the course of the working process as independent works of art. The sketches also document the genesis and former appearance of one of the famous, now lost pictorial cycles of the European Baroque. The Gotha group is of outstanding importance, however, not only with regard to the lost originals, but also because it unites five closely related designs from the cycle and thus offers an unusually coherent insight into Rubens's working method in his first great public monumental commission. The five panels thus formed no accidental grouping, but an exceptionally telling section of the overall programme of the Jesuit church. The five panels are at the same time a mirror of the more recent history of the Gotha collection. The *Elijah* was already in the ducal Kunstkammer at the beginning of the 18th century. Four further panels – *Athanasius*, *Basil*, *Gregory of Nazianzus* and *Augustine* – were acquired by Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg in 1802 from the Brussels art dealer François-Xavier de Burtin. They were subsequently presented in the Ducal Museum as outstanding works by Peter Paul Rubens. That these pictures can now be shown together again is a stroke of art-historical good fortune, with regard both to the individual works and to the overall context documented in them.

Notes

1 CRLB XXII-3, p. 42.
2 CRLB XXII-3, p. 26.
3 CRLB XXI, nos. 10–16; Bertram/Büttner 2018, no. 4.
4 Bertram 2016, pp. 212–242.
5 Bertram 2018, pp. 146–152.
6 CRLB XXII-3, p. 55.
7 CRLB XXII-3, p. 55.
8 CRLB XXII-3, pp. 55–58.
9 *Kasboek*, Antwerp, Rubenshuis, inv. no. RH.D.031, fol. 79v; CRLB XXII-3, p. 58, n. 27.
10 CRLB I, pp. 213–215.
11 Büttner 2026, pp. 237–239.
12 Begeyn 2019, pp. 103–110.
13 CRLB VIII, pp. 26–39, no. 104; pp. 73–78, no. 115.
14 CRLB VIII, pp. 29–30, no. 104a; pp. 75–76, no. 115a.
15 Begeyn 2019, p. 107, fig. 4.
16 Antwerp, FelixArchief, 2574#70 (Sint Lucasgilde, 1. Liggere 1453–1616), fol. 159v: 'Peeter Rubbens, vrymeester, scilder'; Büttner 2006, p. 33.
17 CRLB XIX-3, no. 189.
18 CRLB XIX-4, nos. 21–38.
19 Annette Kollmann and Eva Tasch, in: Büttner/Diefenthaler 2021, pp. 77–103.
20 Nils Büttner, in: CRLB XI-2, pp. 518–528, no. 100.
21 De Bie 1662, p. 136.
22 Büttner 2006, p. 46.
23 Balis 2023, pp. 56–122.
24 Büttner 2017, pp. 41–53.
25 'Voorts mach ic segghen met der waerheyt, sonder eenich hyperbole, dat ic over die hondert hebben moeten refuseren.' Rooses/Ruelens 1887–1909, II, p. 35.
26 Balis 2023, pp. 56–122.
27 Copenhagen, Det Kongelige Bibliotek, Gl. Kgl. Samling 3094 4, pp. 28–29.
28 Lammertse/Vergara 2018; Schmiedlechner 2021; Vergara 2024.
29 CRLB I, pp. 213–214.
30 CRLB I, p. 214: 'soo haest het hem mogelijcksal syn immers voor het uytgaen van desen tegenwoordigen Jaere ofte met het beginsel van het toekomende Jaer.'
31 CRLB I, p. 214: 'Ten tweeden dat den voors. Sr Rubbens de teekeninge van alle de voors.[creven] 39 Stucken sal gehouden sijn met syn eygen handt in't Cleyne te maken, ende door Van Dyck mitsgaders sommige andere syne disipelen soo int groot te doen opwerken, ende volmaken als den heysch van de Stucken ende van de plaetsen daer s'ingeset moeten worden wesen sal.'
32 Balis/Van Hout 2012, p. 62; Van Hout 2008.
33 CRLB I, no. 18b; Lammertse/Vergara 2018, pp. 104–110, nos. 19–23.
34 CRLB I, no. 19.
35 RB III, pp. 265–309.
36 Linke 2014, pp. 235–266.
37 CRLB I, no. 24b.
38 CRLB I, no. 19b.
39 CRLB I, p. 41: 'Alle zijn ontworpen en uitgevoerd door een beroemde schilder, die, vanwege de moeilijkheidsgraad van de situatie en het perspektief, zichzelf in dit werk heeft overtroffen.'
40 CRLB XX-1.
41 CRLB XX-1, no. 15.
42 Bexte 2012, pp. 37–52.
43 CRLB I, p. 214: 'Ten derden dat den voors. Rubbens sal met syn Eygen handt opmaken een ander Schilderie voor een van de vier zijde autaeren van de voors. Kercke sulcke als den voors. P. Praeposito t' synen tyde gelieven sal, ofte in Stede van dese laetSte schilderie sal hy aen den voors. P. Praeposito overleveren alle de negen en dertigh kleyne afteekeningen boven genoemt, ende dat ten keuse van den voors. Sr Rubbens.'

welches Detail genau?





Timo Trümper

FROM DESIGN TO MASTERPIECE. RUBENS IN THE GOTHA COLLECTIONS

While the Gotha collections have always reflected the individual interests and inclinations of their princely collectors, a continuous interest in Netherlandish painting, and in particular in the outstanding artistic personalities of its time, is already evident in the early inventories. Rubens is present from the very beginning, albeit not at first as a painter in the narrower sense: in the first Kunstkammer inventory of 1657/59, his name appears in connection with works on paper that had been gathered together in albums.[1] The second Kunstkammer inventory of 1717 then also records, for the first time, a painting expressly described as a copy after Rubens: the now-lost *Judgement of Solomon*.[2] The painting *Mercenary with a Girl and an Old Woman*, likewise already recorded in 1717, is by contrast initially listed without any attribution (cat. 8).[3] Accordingly, it appears in the inventory of 1721 under an attribution to an unknown master, while at the same time the figures depicted are interpreted as 'Rubens, embracing his wife'.[4] In later inventories the painting is eventually assigned to the school of Rubens.

A marked expansion of the holdings of Netherlandish painting can be observed under Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1691–1732).[5] The inventories of 1721 and 1764 list six further works associated with Rubens.[6] Alongside a depiction of *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence* described as a copy, an oil sketch from the Jesuit cycle also appears for the first time with *The Ascension of St Elijah*, although it is expressly categorised as 'after Rubens'. In addition, there is a painting *Soldier and Girl* as well as 'A rare piece, wherein Rubens presents himself together with his whole family'.[7] The inventory further records a large-format painting with '3 naked female persons, and 1 little child in a basket, together with a little dog'. Kept in the "lumber room", it may have been one of the many versions of the Finding of Erichthonius by the Daughters of Cecrops, the best-known version of which is now in the Liechtenstein Collection (fig. 29).

What is remarkable here is not so much the number of works associated with

Rubens as the range of attributions already discernible in the inventory. Alongside paintings expressly identified as copies and works 'after Rubens' stand works attributed to the master himself without any further qualification. The early inventory thus documents not only a collection, but also a historical stage in the practice of attribution: even here, distinctions are drawn between different forms of relationship to Rubens, even if this classification became increasingly consolidated and refined over time. With growing art-historical expertise, then, this differentiation, already established in the 18th and 19th centuries, in classifying works as autograph, workshop, copy or imitation became increasingly assured. The first printed catalogues of the Gotha picture gallery, of 1868, 1883 and 1890, list a total of eleven works attributed to Rubens himself, to his school or to his followers.[8] The initially varied designations such as 'by', 'after' or 'from the school of' Rubens are thus replaced by an increasingly systematic art-historical classification. This development shows that the history of the Rubens collection in Gotha is not only one of acquisitions and accessions, but also one of changing expertise and thus of the continual redefinition of what could count as 'Rubens' within the collection.



Fig. 29 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Finding of Erichthonius* (c. 1616), oil on canvas, 218 × 317 cm, Liechtenstein, The Princely Collections, inv. no. GE 111

Repetitions and designs

The *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* is one of the early works associated with the name of Rubens in Gotha. The now lost painting on copper survives only in a historical photograph (cat. 13).[9] A further, reduced version, which can be traced in the inventories from 1721 onwards and came from the collection of Baron Gotter, is still in the Gotha collections today (cat. 9).[10] Both paintings are closely related to the famous composition of the *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* that Rubens created around 1613/14 for the church of Notre-Dame de la Chapelle in Brussels and which is now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (fig. 30).[11] The Gotha paintings are thus part of an early tradition of transmitting and repeating the composition, which was also disseminated through, among other things, an engraving made by Lucas Vorsterman in 1621.

For the classification of the works within the collection, Georg Rathgeber's distinction between the two versions in 1844 is particularly illuminating. He describes the canvas as a copy of a sketch that Rubens had made for the Munich painting:

'I cannot possibly pass it off as a sketch by Rubens's hand. It might well, however, be a copy of that sketch which Rubens would have made for the purpose of the painting in the Bavarian gallery. In executing it on a large scale, Rubens must have made some further alterations or improvements, since the Bavarian painting deviates here and there somewhat from the copy of the sketch in Gotha. This painting in the Gotha gallery has suffered exceedingly, so that it can only be described as the remnant of one that once existed.'[12]

He thus relates the damaged, or seemingly unfinished, canvas version not directly to the executed Munich composition, but to an original design by Rubens whose existence he assumed. Moreover, the inclusion of such a sketch-like version in the Gotha gallery points to an interest in the different stages and forms in which a pictorial idea was transmitted. Besides the finished painting, smaller works associated with the process of creation could thus also appear worthy of collecting. This is illuminating for the history of the Gotha Rubens holdings in that it reveals an interest in the artistic genesis and transmission of works which, at the same time, forms an important backdrop for the classification of the genuinely autograph oil sketches in the Gotha collection.

By contrast, there is the painting of St Lawrence documented from 1826 onwards, which Rathgeber classifies as a 'carefully painted copy on copper of the Munich painting'.[13] Unlike the canvas version discussed above, here he expressly emphasises the careful and refined execution. The choice of copper as the support and the exceptionally precise handling are likely to have contributed significantly to this version being perceived as of higher quality. It was ultimately this

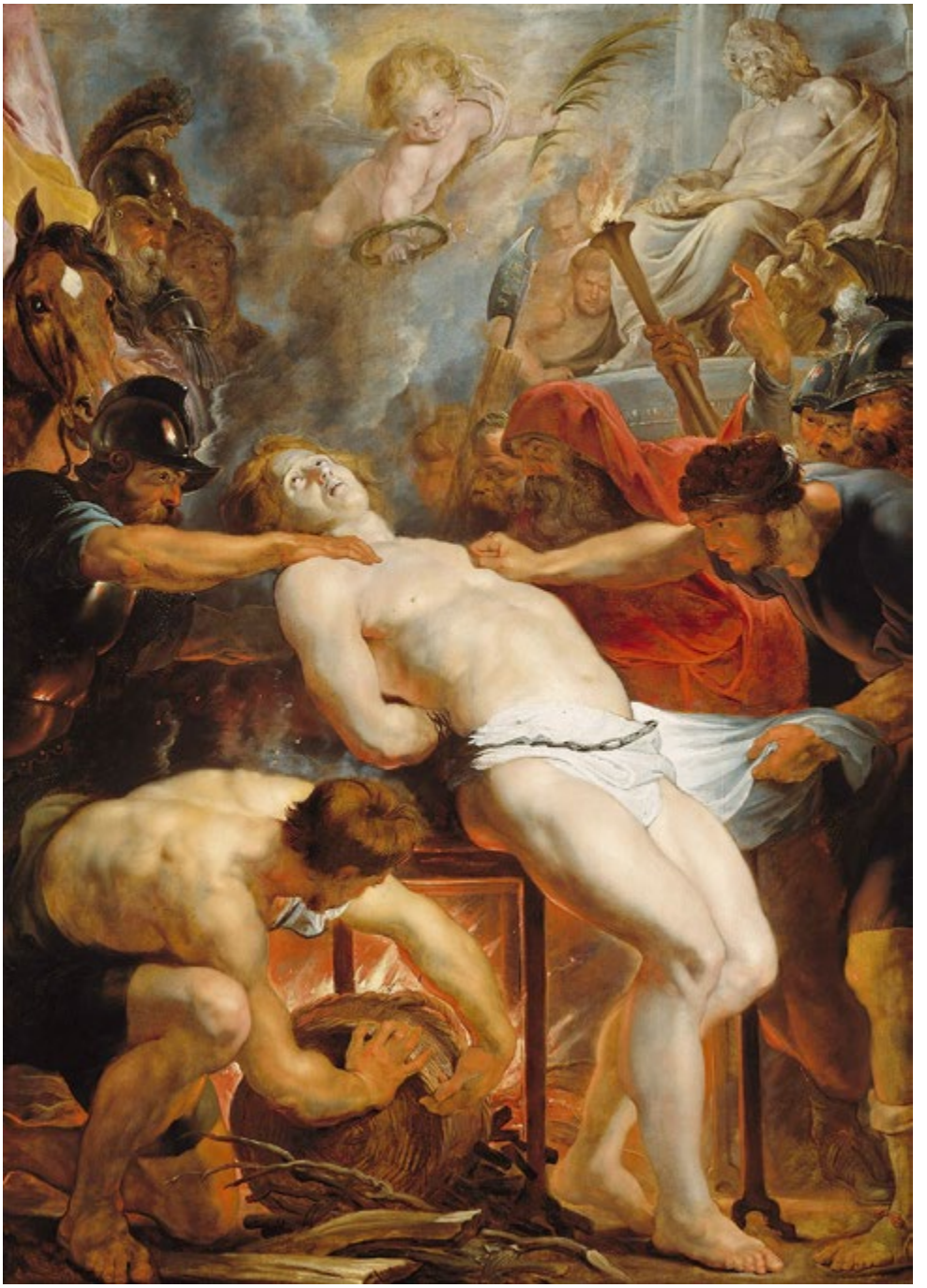


Fig. 30 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence* (c. 1613/14), oil on panel, 250 x 178.5 cm, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 338

particular quality that also made the painting attractive to the art trade in the 20th century: in 1936 it was removed from the Gotha collection and sold.[14]

The Rubens family

The so-called *Garden of Love* is likewise documented among the early Gotha holdings, where it occupies a special position (cat. 6).[15] It was acquired in Leipzig in 1720, under Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, from 'Pechmann' for 800 thalers, and can already be traced in the inventory of 1721.[16] The acquisition thus falls squarely within the phase in which the Rubens holdings of the Gotha collection expanded significantly.

The reference to the seller or previous owner is noteworthy insofar as the context of the acquisition fits into the supra-regional networks of courtly and aristocratic art collecting. The Barons von Pechmann belonged to a Saxon-Bavarian noble family whose members held influential positions around 1700 in the Leipzig area and at the imperial court, and who were associated with art holdings of high rank.[17] The purchase of the painting in Leipzig thus already points to those supra-regional networks of exchange through which works of Netherlandish painting entered princely collections. For the history of the painting in Gotha, however, it is not only its early incorporation into the collection that is of interest, but equally the way in which it was perceived and designated over a long period. The designation as 'Rubens Family, known under the name of the Garden of Love', or the identification of individual figures as Rubens and his relatives, is to be understood first of all as a contemporary or historically transmitted description of the subject.[18] From this there developed a decidedly biographical reading, which understood the painting as a possible glimpse into the artist's personal circle and went beyond a purely representational or allegorical description. This becomes particularly clear in 18th-century travel literature: in 1741 Johann Georg Keyßler describes the painting as a 'Portrait of Rubens, his mistress and his disciple van Dyck'.[19] Of greater interest than the question of its factual accuracy is the remarkable longevity of this biographical reading. In the 19th and 20th centuries, too, the painting continues to be encountered under designations such as 'The Rubens Family' or 'Rubens's Family', for instance in Gustav Parthey's *Deutscher Bildersaal* of 1864.[20] For generations, the biographical interpretation was thus part of the way in which the painting was perceived and handed down in Gotha.

More recent art-historical research has fundamentally changed this classification: it no longer regards the Gotha painting as an independent autobiographical testimony by Rubens, but as a reduced version or copy after the *Garden of Love* in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid, which was painted around 1632/35 (fig. 31). The Madrid painting itself has been discussed in scholarship both in

connection with the courtly, allegorical imagery of the *Garden of Love* and in relation to Rubens's personal circumstances and his marriage to Hélène Fourment.[21] It is precisely this combination of allegorical and biographical interpretation that explains why a reading as 'The Rubens Family' was able to establish itself so lastingly in Gotha, too.

The first autograph sketch

The oil sketch *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* opens up a different, yet equally illuminating, approach to the history of the Rubens holdings in Gotha. Whereas the *Garden of Love* allows us above all to trace the long persistence of a particular interpretation, the *Elijah* sketch affords a deeper insight into the routes by which an autograph design by Rubens entered the Gotha holdings. At the same time, its provenance leads far beyond the Thuringian duchy, linking it to the international networks of the European art trade and of collecting.

The sketch can be traced through a very early, 17th-century record of provenance in Antwerp. In the 1642 probate inventory of the art dealer Herman de Neyt (1588–1642), it appears as 'Een schets van den propheet Elias opgevoert, van Rubbens'.[22] De Neyt, himself a painter and



Fig. 31 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Garden of Love* (c. 1632/35), oil on canvas, 199 x 286 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. no. P001690

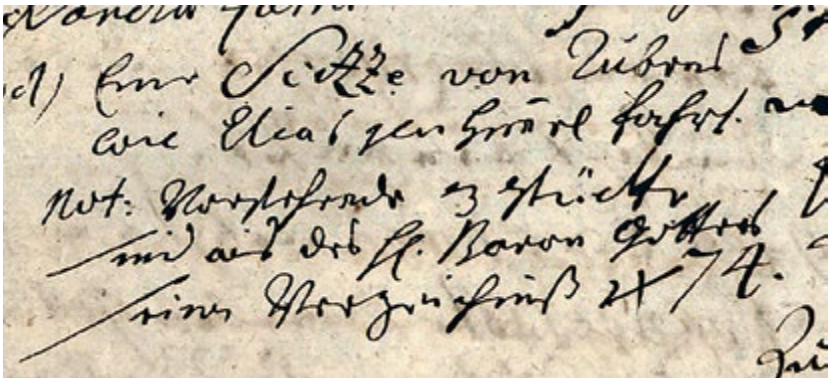


Fig. 32
Extract from the Kunstkammer/picture inventory of 1721, fol. 167, no. 73c, Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Gotha

one of the most important Antwerp art dealers of his day, owned an extensive collection which, alongside numerous works by other artists, included a considerable number of works by Rubens, among them, in addition to the *Elijah*, further oil sketches for the Antwerp Jesuit church. From Antwerp, the onward journey of this one sketch presumably led to Vienna.[23]

For the Gotha collection, it acquired particular importance under Duke Friedrich II. Among the new acquisitions, the inventory of 1721 expressly records: 'A sketch by Rubens of Elijah ascending to heaven'. The note that follows, 'from Baron Gotter's', indicates that the picture, together with three further works named in the inventory, came from the collection of Baron Gustav Adolf von Gotter (1692–1762) (fig. 32).[24] Thus the sketch, like the painting of St Lawrence before it, can be linked at a very early date to a collector whose own biography was closely bound up with the political and cultural networks of the Gotha court. Gotter, himself a native of Gotha who initially served the House of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg, spent long periods in Vienna from the 1710s onwards and made his career there as a diplomat. His time at the imperial court also gave him access to the international courtly circles that were of central importance for building up major private collections. The *Elijah* sketch thus did not come to Gotha directly from the Netherlandish art world, but via that supra-regional network of agents and diplomats who, in the early 18th century, increasingly determined the routes taken by high-ranking works of art, especially into princely collections.

The acquisition from Gotter's collection is also of interest with regard to later developments. His Viennese art collection was acquired in 1736 by Duke Eberhard Ludwig of Württemberg (1676–1733).[25] In addition, further important works of art, as well as his Baroque palace at Molsdorf, passed into the possession of the princes of Gotha after 1748.[26] Their path thus illustrates in exemplary fashion how individual works from private collections of a courtly character could be trans-

ferred into princely holdings, and how closely the history of such works was bound up with the personal networks of their collectors.

At the same time, the provenance of the *Elijah* sketch opens up a second perspective on the early Rubens collection in Gotha. In the inventory of 1721, it appears not as an autograph work by Rubens, but expressly as a painting 'after Rubens'. Its status was thus assessed quite differently at that time than some 80 years earlier, when the direct connection between the sketches and the Jesuit commission was still known. Although this attribution was subsequently revised in later inventories and catalogues, its connection with the four later-acquired sketches from the same cycle was not recognised until 1890.[27]

Four jewels of art

The Gotha oil sketches of the saints *Athanasius* and *Basil*, *Gregory* and *Augustine* entered the collection of Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) in 1802 (fig. 33). Their acquisition through the Brussels art dealer François Xavier de Burtin (1743–1818) also shows the high regard which the four works already enjoyed in the contemporary art trade on account of their exceptional artistic quality. They were offered not merely as works by the famous master, but were expressly presented as rare autograph works and thus as works of art particularly worthy of collecting.

De Burtin first mentions the four sketches in a letter to the duke dated 1 November 1801. In it he announces:

'If my efforts are successful, I expect soon to have the pleasure of offering His Highness four genuine original paintings by the great Rubens, which [are worth] 100 louis d'or apiece between brothers; but I hope to manage it so that the four together will cost you no more than 100 louis d'or de France.'[28]

In a second letter from Brussels, dated 20 February 1802, de Burtin discusses the works in greater detail. He describes them as 'four interesting paintings by Rubens' and emphasises both their material quality and their exceptional artistic quality:

'These 4 paintings, painted on oak, 21 Saxon inches high and 27 3/8 inches wide, are very well preserved and are set in most magnificent frames carved from oak and entirely gilded, each of which cost at least 5 louis d'or.'

At the same time, he stresses their special place within Rubens's œuvre: 'They are painted entirely by the great Rubens himself, to serve as models for his pupils', and had

'always been generally known, not only for their unquestionable origin from Rubens, but also because they belong to the small number of his works that are entirely by his own hand and to which none of his skilful pupils contributed.'

It was precisely this combination of assured autograph status, exceptional painterly quality and rarity that established their particular value for a princely collection. De Burtin heightens this line of argument to the point of explicitly characterising the four works as jewels of art:

'Although these 4 jewels of art could, without exaggeration, be valued at 500 louis d'or [...] and although 180 louis d'or had been asked of me for them, very fortunate circumstances enabled me to acquire them [the paintings] so cheaply [...] that in fact they cost me in all only the modest price of 96 [...] French louis d'or.'

Finally, he assures the duke:

'For the rest, I venture to hope that His Highness will be forever grateful for the splendid acquisition that I enabled him to make so cheaply, and which will become the ornament of his collection!'

The correspondence offers a revealing insight into the contemporary art trade, into the reception of the works and into the dealer's strategies of negotiation and argument. It highlights not only the exceptionally favourable terms of acquisition, but above all the criteria by which Burtin presented the four sketches as particularly worthy of collecting: their autograph status, their outstanding painterly quality, their rarity and their excellent state of preservation. Ernst II finally acquired the four works in 1802.



Fig. 33 Johann Jonas Michael: *Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg* (1800), oil on canvas, 83.0 x 71.0 cm, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. no. 3885

Burtin, who appears in this context as an art dealer, was also active in Brussels as an accomplished collector and connoisseur of painting. His own collection, comprising more than 250 paintings, and his *Traité théorique et pratique des connoissances*, published in 1808, show him to have been a figure in the contemporary art market well versed in questions of the attribution, valuation and conservation of paintings.[29] From the 1770s onwards, he also documented the Brussels picture trade. The connection with Gotha thus fits into a broader field of activity in which Burtin acted as collector, connoisseur and intermediary between the art market and the princely collection.

Caress and repetition

The *Pastoral Scene* is of particular significance for the perception of Rubens in Gotha. The painting can only be traced in the Gotha picture gallery from 1826. In that year's inventory it was still listed as an autograph work and at the same time interpreted autobiographically as 'Rubens himself as a shepherd caressing his wife'.[30] Subsequently the realisation increasingly took hold that it could not be an autograph work by the master: Rathgeber at first suspected Jacob Jordaens as its author; later the painting was classified as a school or studio picture and finally as a work of the Rubens school.[31] In 1890 Max Rooses recognised it as a copy after Rubens's *Pastoral Scene* in Munich, and today the Gotha painting is regarded as a partial copy after this model (fig. 34).[32] With its unusually large format of 159 x 190.7 cm, it is moreover one of the largest paintings in the Gotha collection.

Besides the *Pastoral Scene*, the Gotha collection contained further repetitions and smaller versions after works by Rubens which are among the losses caused by the war. These include *Neptune and Amphitrite*, a small copy in a widened format after the painting formerly in the Berlin Gemäldegalerie (fig. 35), and *The Battle of the Amazons*, a copy after the work now preserved in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich (fig. 36).[33] This group was complemented by *Venus before the Bath*, which was catalogued as a work of the school of Rubens (cat. 11). The three paintings are missing today, but can be documented as part of the Gotha collection through the catalogue of 1890.

It is remarkable that the painting of *Neptune and Amphitrite* can only be traced in Gotha from the 19th century onwards. It is therefore reasonable to assume that it came from the private art holdings of Dukes Ernst I and Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha and was brought from Coburg to Gotha in connection with the establishment of the Ducal Museum. Although such a provenance is not directly documented, it would be consistent with the history of the museum's creation and the composition of its holdings. Evidently, there were not enough large-format paintings available for a representative display, particularly of Netherlandish painting. Copies and works from the master's circle may have been able to fulfil a supplementary function here: they enriched the holdings with prominent subjects and compositions and, at the same time, helped to make Rubens's presence tangible in the gallery display.

Neptune and Amphitrite and *The Battle of the Amazons* in particular point to important compositions by Rubens that were not represented in Gotha itself by the corresponding originals. The inclusion of such copies and works associated with the Rubens school can therefore be understood not merely as a substitute for missing originals; rather, it shows how, in the 19th century, the notion of a representative Rubens collec-



Fig. 34 Peter Paul Rubens: *Pastoral Scene* (Silvia and Coridon; c. 1638), oil on panel, 162.3 x 134.5 cm, Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Alte Pinakothek, inv. no. 328

tion could also be constituted through repetitions, reduced versions and works from the master's circle. Together with the large-format *Pastoral Scene*, an ensemble thus emerged that made visible the different forms of engagement with Rubens's pictorial world within the Gotha collection.



Fig. 35 Peter Paul Rubens: *Neptune and Amphitrite* (c. 1614), oil on canvas, 230 x 305 cm, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz. Probably destroyed in May 1945 in the Friedrichshain flak tower, Berlin

A wall for Rubens

The status that Rubens and his circle enjoyed in Gotha can be seen particularly vividly in the first presentation of the paintings in the Netherlandish Hall of the Ducal Museum in 1879.[34] The north wall of the first room on the east side of the top floor, devoted to Rubens and his school, was dominated by the large-format *Pastoral Scene*, which, together with a self-portrait attributed to van Dyck, the *Garden of Love* and the five oil sketches, formed a central and symmetrical display (fig. 37). Above this wall, densely filled with some 38 works, a portrait of Rubens was moreover intended for the vault of the ceiling. The master was thus present in the room not only through his works, but also, as it were, through a portrait, as an overarching artistic personality. As the pictorial centrepiece of the densely and symmetrically arranged 'Rubens wall', the *Pastoral Scene* at the same time brought together the various facets under which Rubens was collected and presented in Gotha. The gallery hang of 1879 thus forms a fitting culmination of the development of the Gotha Rubens collection: in it, the notions of what could count as 'Rubens', which changed over the course of the 18th and



Fig. 36 Peter Paul Rubens: *The Battle of the Amazons* (c. 1618), oil on panel, 120.3 x 165.3 cm, Alte Pinakothek Munich, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen, inv. no. 324

19th centuries, are condensed into a representative presentation of the master and his artistic circle.

Particular significance attaches to the five oil sketches, which, unlike the workshop pieces and the repetitions by his followers, point to Rubens himself and to the artistic working process. Their function as designs lent them a status that went beyond their smaller format and made them direct testimonies to the master's creative practice. The presentation of 1879 thus shows different forms of proximity to Rubens – from the finished painting via the oil sketch to works of his school – and allowed the Gotha Rubens holdings to appear as a coherent ensemble of works of differing authorship, function and genesis. The history of the Rubens collection in Gotha can therefore not be understood solely as a continuous expansion of its holdings. Rather, as the holdings changed, so too did the notion of what, within a princely collection, could count as a masterpiece by Rubens and as a particularly telling testimony to his art.



Fig. 37 Heinrich Justus Schneider (attributed): hanging plan for the first Netherlandish Hall, north wall: Rubens, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha

Anmerkungen

1 Cf. Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, pp. 117–118.
2 Inv. 1717, fol. 96r; Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, p. 185.
3 Inv. 1717, fol. 149v; Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, p. 204.
4 Inv. 1721, p. 513, no. 172.
5 On the interest in Netherlandish art, cf. also the Grand Tours of the Gotha dukes and princes: Duke Friedrich I of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg travelled through France as well as Holland, Brabant and Flanders in 1687/88; his son, the Hereditary Prince Friedrich (II), undertook a journey in 1692/93 to, among other places, Holland and Flanders. The account by Johann Christoph Emmerling also attests to the appreciation of important ecclesiastical art and furnishings: the Antwerp Jesuit church is praised as one of the most beautiful churches in 'Teutschland' [Germany], particularly for its marble, its paintings, its architecture and its gilded decoration. A direct connection with viewing works by Peter Paul Rubens is not, however, documented by this; cf. Landesarchiv Thüringen – Staatsarchiv Gotha, Geheimer Rat, no. 5096, fol. 47; Forschungsbibliothek Gotha, Chart. A 546.
6 Ibid., pp. 304; 308; 331–332; 336; 340.
7 On the classification of the so-called *Garden of Love*, cf. the relevant entries in the inventory of 1721, ibid., pp. 332–334.
8 Cat. 1868, sect. IV, pp. 6; 24; 26–27; 41–42; 46–49; 51; cat. 1890, nos. 34–43; 74; 94.
9 Inv. 1824, p. 131, sect. 12, no. 48, from the collection of Ernst I of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha; allegedly sold on 5 September 1936 to the Galerie Schumann, Frankfurt am Main; its present whereabouts are unknown.
10 Cat. 1868, sect. IV, p. 26, no. 54; Cat. 2014, pp. 220–221, no. A17.
11 CRLB VIII, no. 126.
12 Rathgeber 1844, p. 35.
13 Rathgeber 1835, p. 323.
14 Schuttwolf 2011, pp. 65–66, no. 137. The information that the work was still in the collection in 1937, was transferred to the library in 1940 and was restored in 1941 is contradictory. The painting would thus belong to a later line of loss.
15 CRLB XVII, pp. 67–68, no. 1, copy 35.
16 Inv. 1721, p. 515, no. 185.
17 Cf. Neue Deutsche Biographie 2001.
18 Inv. 1826, fol. 46, no. 11.
19 Keyßler 1741, p. 1135.
20 Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 430, no. 290.
21 The title *Conversatie à la mode* is also recorded from the period, Goodman 1992, p. 6; CRLB XVII, p. 59, under no. 1.
22 On Herman de Neyt's probate inventory of 1642 and the work recorded in it, 'Een Schets van den propheet Elias opgevoert van Rubbens', cf. the corresponding provenance entry for the *Elijah* sketch.
23 From 1714 onwards, Antwerp was directly subject to Emperor Charles VI (1685–1740) and, despite the closure of the Scheldt, remained an important European centre of trade and of the art market.
24 Thüringisches Staatsarchiv Gotha, Best. Kunstkammer-/Gemäldeinventar 1721, fol. 166, no. 73c: 'Eine Skizze von Rubens wie Elias gen Himmel fährt; Not: vorstehende 3 Stücke __ aus des H. Baron Gotters.'
25 Galletti 1780, pp. 324–325.
26 Mention should also be made of the monumental painting depicting the Relief of Vienna; cf. Trümper 2017, pp. 84–86.
27 Cat. 1890, p. 8.
28 Quoted in excerpts from Cat. 2014, p. 148.
29 Burtin 1808.
30 Inv. 1826, sect. V, p. 47, no. 16.
31 Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 51.
32 Rooses 1890/1970, vol. 4, p. 79.
33 The Berlin model with Neptune and Amphitrite is likewise among the war losses, Lost Art ID 92360. Cf. the entries in Cat. 1890, p. 10, nos. 42–43; p. 20, no. 94; p. 120, n. 42; p. 121, n. 94.
34 Trümper 2021, pp. 26–28.



Ronny Licht

THE ODYSSEY OF THE OIL SKETCHES – CONTINUITIES, RUPTURES AND WRONG TURNS IN THEIR PROVENANCE

The history of collecting and loss of Gotha's art treasures is concentrated in Peter Paul Rubens's five oil sketches as in hardly any other group of works. Once celebrated as the representative core of Flemish painting in the Ducal Museum, these modelli painted on panel became, in the 20th century, witnesses to and objects of profound political upheavals and of changing property rights. This article uses the oil sketches to trace the multi-layered lines of loss that began with the wartime evacuations from 1943 onwards. It sheds light on the tension between the fiduciary role of the ducal administration, ideologically driven alienations and the demands of the international art market in the post-war period. While two of the works returned to Gotha as early as 1958, having passed through the stages of Soviet trophy art and subsequent restitution by the USSR, the remaining three sketches stayed in Western collections and museums for decades. Taking the fate of the individual panels as an example – in particular that of *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* and its time in the renowned New York collection of Curtis O. Baer (1898–1976) and Kathi Meyer-Baer (1892–1977) – the article reconstructs in detail the eventful provenance history up to the most recent, spectacular recovery of the work for the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha in 2026.

The wartime relocations of the five Gotha Rubens oil sketches in the light of Gotha's lines of loss

Until well into the first half of the 20th century, more precisely until their evacuation to Reinhardsbrunn, the five oil sketches remained together in Gotha as a single group. From 1945 onwards, they too became part of the multi-layered contexts of loss that the Second World War and its long shadow cast over the collections in the palace and the Ducal Museum.

Gotha's active and passive shaping of its collection profile was subject to the rapid succession of upheavals and collapses of systems and regimes, and to the ideological renunciations or reorientations underlying them. This can be traced particularly clearly in the intensive sell-offs of local holdings on a semi-legal basis. These are directly connected with the legal proceedings for settling the ducal family's assets of the House of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. That procedure, in turn, was based on the agreement between the Free State of Prussia and the Free State of Thuringia and was completed in 1928 with the founding of the art foundation (Kunststiftung) and the family foundation (Familienstiftung). The sales arose out of the financial hardship that now prevailed, but were at the same time a means of disposing of unwanted objects, often only half-truthfully labelled as 'duplicates' or 'damaged'. It is documented that this was done without the obligatory consultation of the foundation's advisory board and of the Thuringian state government – more precisely, the Thuringian Ministry of Justice and the Ministry of Public Education.[1] As in other major collecting institutions of those years, the proceeds also served to finance acquisitions.[2]

The oil sketches from Rubens's hand, too, were repeatedly the subject of purchase enquiries, but also of loan requests, as the foundation's internal archival sources from the 1930s and 1940s reveal. In December 1936, the prominent London and later New York art dealer Delius Giese addressed the following, decidedly cheeky enquiry directly to the Gotha director, Dr Eberhard Freiherr Schenk zu Schweinsberg (1893–1990):

'[…] Surely you must be due to carry out a little reorganisation of your collection along modern lines again. To that end, you really ought to sell at least two of your Rubens sketches, seeing that you have five.'[3]

The two men had met in Berlin a few days earlier, where their conversation had evidently also touched on Gotha's oil sketches by Rubens. Of interest in this exchange of letters – above all with regard to the fates of the five works from 1945 onwards – is Schenk zu Schweinsberg's prompt reply to the petitioner:

'Dear Mr Giese, I would ask you to consider the question of the Rubens sketches closed. I do not even believe that any of my later successors will ever touch this possession, still less shall I do so. […]'.[4]

In 1937, Gotha received a loan request from the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique for three of the five oil sketches for the major special exhibition 'Esquisses de Rubens'; it was written personally by the director of the Brussels institution, Leo van Puyvelde (1882–1965), and was approved just as personally by Schenk zu Schweinsberg.[5] The works lent were *St Augustine*, *St Gregory of Nazianzus* and *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot*. Schenk zu Schweinsberg

delivered the well-insured works to Brussels for the exhibition in person, travelling the 550 kilometres by rail.[6] From 1943 onwards, owing to the intensified Allied air raids, the holdings of the Ducal Museum were gradually moved to bombproof depots. Besides the cellars of Schloss Friedenstein, the main evacuation site was the nearby hunting lodge of Reinhardsbrunn near Friedrichroda.[7] Some 126 large crates were stored there, containing holdings from Gotha but also from Danzig, Elbing and Marienwerder.[8] With the end of the Second World War, Gotha's losses gathered considerable momentum. As a result of the decisions of the Yalta Conference in February of the last year of the war, those involved in the ducal house and in the foundation's management knew that, although Thuringia would initially be occupied by American troops, it was to be assigned to the Soviet Occupation Zone (SBZ) once hostilities had ended. The Ducal Central Administration in Coburg – the family's seat of residence in the Free State of Bavaria, which had been allocated to the US zone – feared the complete expropriation of the house's and the foundation's assets by the Red Army. Even before the US Third Army marched into Gotha, the ducal administration therefore arranged the first removals. On 27 March 1945, two heavily laden crates arrived at the ducal house in Coburg. They contained three of the five Rubens oil sketches (*The Prophet Elijah*, *St Augustine* and *St Gregory*), Frans Hals's famous *Half-Length Portrait of an Unknown Gentleman with Hat and Gloves* and de luxe manuscripts from the Ducal Library, including medieval codices. This operation took place without the involvement of the Thuringian heritage authorities and was coordinated under the leadership of Duchess Viktoria Adelheid of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1885–1970), with the participation of the foundation's director, Dr Schenk zu Schweinsberg. The most extensive and most consequential operation in this context took place in the last days of June 1945, immediately before Thuringia was handed over to the Soviet army on 2 July 1945.

On 26 June 1945, a dramatic confrontation took place at Schloss Friedenstein. Hermann Henselmann (1905–1995), the district building officer appointed by the Thuringian state administration and later a leading architect of the GDR, encountered Duchess Viktoria Adelheid and the museum director Schenk zu Schweinsberg at the palace. Henselmann tried to block the removal of the collections by pointing out that the works of art were the property of the Gotha foundation and thus indivisible Thuringian cultural property.[9] Duchess Viktoria Adelheid – acting on behalf of her husband Carl Eduard, Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1884–1954), popularly known as 'Hitler's Duke', who had been interned by the Americans three weeks earlier – nevertheless made use of her good connections with the staff of the US military government. She argued, falsely (!), that the objects were the private property of the ducal house.[10] For after the Novem-

ber Revolution of 1918 and Duke Carl Eduard's abdication, an expropriation without compensation by the Free State of Gotha had failed before the Reichsgericht, the supreme court of the German Reich, in 1925. This led, on 10 February 1928, to a settlement between the State of Thuringia and the ducal house, which created two independent legal entities: the family foundation received the private real estate, landed property and financial assets; the Herzog von Sachsen- Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft (Duke of Saxe- Coburg and Gotha Foundation for Art and Science, Kunststiftung for short), as a foundation under public law, took over the indivisible collections at Schloss Friedenstein. The art treasures were thus withdrawn from the family's private control. They include the oil sketches discussed here. Although the local US officers hesitated at first, the ducal house obtained from the US high command the provision of several heavy military lorries. Working day and night shifts, hundreds of crates from Schloss Friedenstein and Schloss Reinhardsbrunn were loaded onto the American lorries. On 29 and 30 June 1945, the convoys left Gotha for Coburg. Formally, the Ducal Central Administration signed a declaration stating that the transport constituted a mere 'rescue and safeguarding measure'. Assurances were given that the property rights of the Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft would remain unaffected and that the works would be returned to Gotha once conditions had stabilised. Thus Schenk zu Schweinsberg, visibly moved, puts on record in a letter of 12 July 1945 to Henselmann:

'[…] On Tuesday, contrary to expectation, I received a telephone call from the Director General of the Ducal Central Administration in Coburg, Landrat Voigts, informing me that he would shortly come to the Friedenstein in an American military vehicle to collect me and take me to Reinhardsbrunn. The ensuing discussion in Gotha revealed that, on the advice and at the instigation of American authorities, parts of the property of the Ducal Family Foundation and of the Ducal Foundation for Art and Science were to be taken from Reinhardsbrunn and Gotha to Coburg. This removal to Coburg was to be a temporary protective measure and was in no way to affect the ownership of the objects removed from the site. The Director General had already given me an assurance to this effect during his visit on Friday and now expressly repeated it. […] The entire measure would be extremely questionable if it involved an intention to change the ownership situation. In my firm conviction, however, no such intention exists, and, referring also to the disquiet in Gotha about the measure, I shall request authorisation to give a corresponding assurance for the foundation's board, insofar as the question is not to be discussed between you and the Director General himself, in writing or orally.'[11]

After the end of the war in 1945, Soviet troops also confiscated important works of art from Gotha and other major collecting institutions on German soil. Officially – and, from a contemporary perspective, by no means without justification – this was done to compensate for the war losses that the USSR had suffered at the hands of the Nazi organisations. At the same time, however, it also compensated for those losses that must be attributed to the sell-off of public and private art collections in the USSR already under Lenin and, at full throttle, under Stalin and his forced industrialisation.[12] On the basis of SMAD Order No. 38, Major Professor Boris Alekseyev held the special authorisation for confiscation in Gotha. For the purpose of assessment, Lieutenant Gorbunkov, together with Alekseyev and the museum director Schenk zu Schweinsberg, inspected the hunting lodge of Reinhardsbrunn, to which many holdings had been evacuated. Shortly afterwards, the deposited crates and furniture were removed by lorry. With the help of the files of Soviet trophy brigades and the records of the brigade member Alexei Pykhtin, the route can be reconstructed: in 1946 the works travelled via the Grassi Museum in Leipzig to Moscow and Leningrad, among other places to the Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage.[13]

In the course of the political rapprochement between the USSR and the GDR, numerous cultural assets were returned between 1952 and 1958 – among them the *Self-Portrait with a Sunflower* after Anthony van Dyck (1599–1641). Nevertheless, some 50 paintings from Gotha remain in Russian collections to this day. The exact number can hardly be determined, owing to archival documents that are difficult to read or missing, and to the interruption of the German–Russian museum dialogue since the start of Russia's full-scale war of aggression against Ukraine.

The two Rubens oil sketches that remained after the ducal removals – *St Athanasius Triumphing over Arius* and *St Basil* – were in the evacuation depot at Schloss Reinhardsbrunn during the wave of removals in June 1945 and were probably simply overlooked by the ducal administration. In June 1946, both works were then seized by the Red Army's trophy brigade, transported to Moscow as trophy art and placed in storage at the Pushkin Museum. Both paintings returned to Gotha as part of the USSR's large-scale restitution to the GDR in 1958. This did not, however, apply to those works that the ducal family had removed as a protective measure against the Soviets. For decades, the two returned oil sketches formed the meagre remnant of Gotha's once world-famous Rubens group.

The fate of the three Rubens works on the international art market

Despite the formal undertaking to keep the works of art only in trust, none of the works taken to Coburg returned to Gotha

in the decades that followed. From the end of the 1940s the ducal administration in Coburg took the legal view that the Gotha foundation had become incapable of acting as a result of the Red Army's arrival and that its seat had de facto been transferred to Coburg.[14] In order to secure the family's livelihood, cover legal costs and finance the foundation's tasks in the West, the masterpieces were gradually introduced onto the international art trade from 1948 onwards. The packing in Gotha had by no means been indiscriminate; rather, through targeted selection, precisely those pieces that commanded the highest value on the international art market were taken to Coburg, as the three Rubens oil sketches, among others, make clear. In 1953 the Coburg foundation management sold the sketch of *St Augustine* through the E. & A. Silberman Galleries to the art dealer and publisher Dr Walter Feilchenfeldt (1894–1953).[15] From there, the work passed in the same year to the Swiss machine-tool manufacturer and arms industrialist Emil Georg Bührle (1890–1956). Bührle built up one of the most



Fig. 38a The reverse of the oil sketch *St Gregory of Nazianzus*, whose provenance marks document various stages of the work's journey around the world

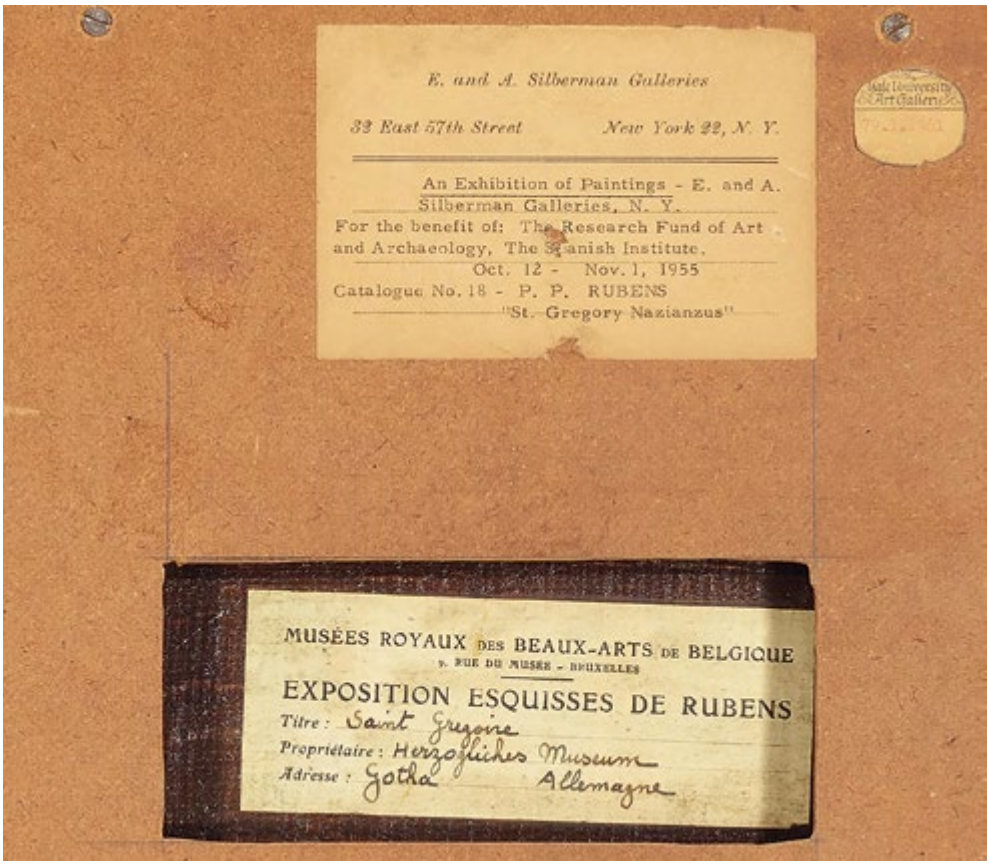


Fig. 38b The three oil sketches *St Augustine*, *St Gregory of Nazianzus* and *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* passed through the New York dealership E. & A. Silberman Galleries when they were sold off by the ducal family. According to the label, the *Gregory* returned to the dealership three years after its sale, as a loan to an exhibition in 1955. Its loan from Gotha to the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels in 1937 can also be read from the reverse

important private art collections in Europe. After his death the work passed to the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection and is today exhibited on permanent loan in the extension building of the Kunsthaus Zürich.[16] To this day, the Bührle Foundation maintains that the purchase in 1953 was made lawfully and in good faith, since the ducal administration in Coburg was deemed to be authorised to act on the foundation's behalf. Applications for restitution or for an amicable solution in the spirit of the Washington Principles and of the 'Gotha Manifesto' of 2002 have so far been rejected by the Swiss side.[17]

In 1952 *St Gregory of Nazianzus* was likewise sold from Coburg to the E. & A. Sil-

berman Galleries (figs 37a–b). In the same year the Albright Art Gallery (later the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, now the Buffalo AKG Art Museum) in Buffalo, New York, acquired the painting. There it hung for almost seventy years as a showpiece of the Flemish Baroque department. In 2020 the museum in Buffalo decided to auction several Old Master works in order to raise funds for the acquisition of contemporary art. The *Gregory* was consigned to Christie's in New York. Thanks to the intervention of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation and the Cultural Foundation of the German Federal States, the auction was halted at the last moment. Three years of tough negotiations followed, involving provenance researchers and specialist lawyers. In June 2024 the work was finally re-acquired for Gotha through a financial agreement with Christie's and the museum in Buffalo. On 24 June 2024 – almost to the day 79 years after its removal – the painting was unveiled once again in the Netherlandish Hall of Schloss Friedenstein (fig. 38).[18]



Fig. 39 Gotha, 26 June 2024: handover of Peter Paul Rubens's *Gregory* to the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha (from left: Knut Kreuch, Dr Timo Trümper, Prof. Dr Dirk Boll, Dr Martin Hoernes, Dr Tobias Pfeifer-Helke). Since then the work has once again hung in its original place

Like the two Rubens sketches before it, the third work taken to Coburg in 1945, *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot*, ultimately also reached the art market in 1952 via the E. & A. Silberman Galleries. This firm, incidentally, itself looks back on a company history that must be regarded as decidedly ambivalent. After the so-called 'Anschluss' of Austria in 1938, the Viennese art dealership E. & A. Silbermann fell victim to systematic Aryanisation. Initially, the art dealer Johann Hecher was installed as provisional administrator of the business. He was replaced on 10 November 1938 by Egon Peter Friese, who took over the liquidation, sold parts of the stock and handed over other items to Elkan and Abraham Silbermann's legal representatives in Budapest. The final dismantling of the business was ultimately carried out from February 1939 by Otto Faltis (1888–1974). Shortly afterwards, in March 1939, Franz Kieslinger (1891–1955) inspected the business and had the stock inventoried once more. Following this, the Vermögensverkehrsstelle (Property Transaction Office) authorised the Dorotheum auction house to sell off the dealership's remaining stock at public auction.[19] The owners, Elkan (1892–1952) and Abris (1896–1968) Silbermann, meanwhile succeeded in fleeing to New York – a city with which they had maintained intensive trading relations since the early 1930s.

There they continued their business under the name E. & A. Silberman Galleries, Inc. Around the time of this new beginning in New York, the gallery also traded in Nazi-looted art, as research by various museums has shown.[20]

From the E. & A. Silberman Galleries, the American collector Curtis O. Baer ultimately acquired the Gotha *Elijah* for his private collection. After his death, his son George M. Baer (1936–2009) took over the work. In his home it could be admired for years as a prominent highlight of the family collection, in the living room in Atlanta, Georgia.[21] For a time the oil sketch was also exhibited on permanent loan at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. After the death of George M. Baer, the trail of the panel was at first lost in the private art trade.

Excursus: the *Elijah*'s seven decades in the Curtis O. Baer Collection

For several decades the *Elijah* was among the highlights of the private collection of the married couple Curtis O. Baer and Kathi Meyer-Baer. Their biographies exemplify that generation of German-Jewish intellectuals whose lives were profoundly shaped by the political upheavals of the 20th century, National Socialist persecution and forced emigration to the United States. While Curtis O. Baer, a businessman and an art historian in the tradition of the educated German middle class, assembled one of the most important private collections of drawings of the post-war period, Kathi Meyer-Baer made history in her discipline as a pioneer of modern musicology and music bibliography.[22] Kathi Meyer grew up in a cultured Berlin family, learned the piano and studied musicology. After a dissertation was rejected in Berlin, she obtained her doctorate in 1915 under Hugo Riemann in Leipzig. From 1922 onwards, she looked after the Paul Hirsch music library in Frankfurt am Main. As its librarian and research assistant she edited its four-volume catalogue, an international standard reference work. In 1927, she also published on and curated the exhibition 'Musik im Leben der Völker' (Music in the Life of Nations). In 1934, she married Kurt Otto Baer – later Curtis O. Baer – and two years later gave birth to their son George in England. After Paul Hirsch fled to England, she kept in contact with him in order to complete the catalogue (volume 4 appeared in Cambridge in 1947). In 1938, the Baer family emigrated to Paris and finally, in 1940, to the USA. Despite never holding a permanent post, Meyer-Baer worked as a freelance musicologist until her death on 3 January 1977, writing scholarly books and making use of short-term fellowships for her research.[23]

Curtis O. Baer, born Kurt in Strasbourg, was an important art collector and connoisseur. Curtis received a classical humanist education and from 1917 studied art history at the University of Freiburg under renowned scholars such as Martin Heidegger, Max J. Friedländer and Hans

Jantzen. Although a regular academic career as his main profession was initially denied him and he worked in New York as a partner in a pharmaceutical trading company, he used his commercial success to pursue his passion for art. Baer acquired his first drawing while still a young man in Frankfurt. On the advice of Edmund Schilling, curator at the Städel Museum, he intensified his collecting in the 1940s. The main part of his collection was ultimately formed in the 1950s and 1960s through purchases at auction, from art dealers and through private contacts in major European cities such as Paris, London and Berlin. His collecting philosophy was based not on rigid systems or preconceived plans, but rather on a spontaneous, emotional bond with the work of art, which he often described as 'love at first sight'.[24] Over several decades, the family home at 51 French Ridge, in the New York suburb of New Rochelle, became a popular meeting place for curators, scholars and connoisseurs.[25] In his later years Baer withdrew from the business world and passed on his art-historical knowledge. From 1961 he taught as a visiting professor at Vassar College, as well as at New York University and Manhattanville College. In 1973, he published the book *Landscape Drawings*, in which he set out his particular convictions about looking at art. His collection grew to more than 100 outstanding works, most of them on paper, spanning the period from the 15th to the early 20th century. The spectrum ranges from masters of the Renaissance and Baroque such as Titian, Peter Paul Rubens, Nicolas Poussin, Rembrandt van Rijn and Jacob van Ruisdael, via the French school of the 18th and 19th centuries with Antoine Watteau, Jacques-Louis David, Eugène Delacroix, Édouard Manet, Edgar Degas and Paul Cézanne, to works by Victor Hugo. Modernism and Expressionism are also represented, with artists such as Max Beckmann, Auguste Rodin, Paul Klee, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Wassily Kandinsky and Constantin Brâncuși. During Baer's lifetime the collection was presented at Harvard's Fogg Art Museum in 1956. After his death in 1976, public and institutional recognition of the collection reached its peak in the 1980s with the travelling exhibition 'Master Drawings from Titian to Picasso', which was shown, among other venues, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and was praised by critics for its exceptional quality. Baer's text of 1957, printed in the exhibition catalogue, places particular emphasis on his focus on Rubens: '[…] My response to the Rubens drawing may have been spontaneous, but it was not unprepared. My previous experience with the 17th century and with Rubens had opened my eyes before I saw this drawing. I already possessed the standard by which I would measure this new specimen in a region of art which was familiar to me.'[26] Today many works from the Baer Collection are in major international museums, above all the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.[27]

(Un)confirmed stages in the provenance up to 2026

On the basis of all the information gathered so far, some of which is cited in this article, the following largely complete chain of provenance events can thus be established for the *Elijah* sketch up to its return to Gotha in 2026:

The work was created around 1620/21, in the context of the contract of 29 March 1620 between Peter Paul Rubens and Father Jacobus Tirinus (1580–1636), superior of the so-called professed house of the Society of Jesus in Antwerp, as an oil sketch for the ceiling decoration of the Antwerp Jesuit church of Sint-Carolus Borromeus.[28] Twenty-two years later, it appears in the estate inventory of the Antwerp art dealer Herman de Neyt (1588–1642).[29] Before 1721 the painting was probably, among other places, in the collection of Gustav Adolf Graf von Gotter (1692–1762). It is not clear from the historical inventory entries, however, whether the work had previously been housed at Schloss Friedrichswerth, or whether it may have been acquired directly from the Netherlands. In 1721 Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1691–1732) acquired 'A sketch by Rubens of Elijah ascending to heaven; Not[a bene]: the preceding 3 pieces __ from Baron Gotter's', as documented by the inventory entry of 1721.[30] In 1854, the sketch is recorded among the holdings of paintings.[31] According to archival records of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, the work was exhibited in 1935 in Top-lit Room 2 of the Ducal Museum Gotha.[32] In 1937 the *Elijah*, together with the *Augustine* and the *Gregory*, is on loan to the special exhibition 'Esquisses de Rubens' at the Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique in Brussels.[33] A loan request from the Kaiser Wilhelm Museum in Krefeld is likewise documented for 1939. The outbreak of the Second World War, however, prevents the planned Krefeld exhibition of Flemish art from taking place.[34] In 1943, the painting was evacuated to Reinhardsbrunn,[35] before being taken to Coburg, according to the handover record of March 1945, as part of the evacuation measures of the Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft.[36] In the post-war period the work was sold unlawfully by the ducal family. By 1952 the sketch had reached the E. & A. Silberman Galleries in New York, in the United States. In the same year, the work was acquired by the collector couple Curtis O. Baer and Kathi Meyer-Baer (New Rochelle, NY).[37] After their deaths it passed into the ownership of their son George Baer (Atlanta, GA / New York).[38] In 1953 the work is part of the special exhibition 'Olieverfschetsen van Rubens' (Rubens's Oil Sketches) at the Museum Boymans in Rotterdam. In the accompanying catalogue it is listed as number 30.[39] Three years later, from January to February 1956, the oil sketch can be admired by the public in the special exhibition 'Drawings & Oil Sketches by P. P. Rubens from American Collections' at the Fogg Art Museum at Harvard.[40] From 1997 up to

and including 2003, the *Elijah* was then recorded as a permanent loan from the Baer family at the National Gallery of Art in Washington.[41] From then on, the trail goes cold until 2025. In March of that year, the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha succeeds in locating the work through an expert intermediary on the East Coast of the USA and promptly opens negotiations. The owner, however, remains anonymous. No agreement is reached on the repurchase price. In February 2026, the work is offered at the renowned auction house Sotheby's in New York. The correspondence between the foundation and the auction house, which asks for information on the work's provenance history, results in the work not going to auction. A month later, in March 2026, the *Elijah* is already in Paris, where a dealer based there offers it to the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha on behalf of the still anonymous American owner. With the assistance of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, an agreement is reached. Since November 2026, after more than 81 years, the oil sketch has been back in Gotha – and possibly for good.

Anmerkungen

1 In November 1931, the Thuringian Ministry of Justice expressly admonished the chairman of the foundation's board, Carl Eduard, Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, that sales carried out without the ministry's consent were to cease. See letter from the Thuringian Ministry of Justice to the Kunststiftung, 28 November 1931, LATh-HStA Weimar, copy in the Archiv Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha (hereafter FSG).
2 Cf., for example, the deaccessioning processes surrounding the Dresden Porcelain Collection in 1919/1920.
3 FSG, 8320, letter of 5 December 1937.
4 FSG, 8320, letter of 11 December 1937.
5 See FSG, 3465b.
6 See FSG, 3465b, letter from Schenk zu Schweinsberg to Leo van Puyvelde of 14 July 1937.
7 LATh-HStA Weimar, C 1624, handover record, March 1945, Coburg.
8 LATh-HStA Weimar, C 1624, fols 135–135v.
9 See Krüger 2021, n. 5: LATh-HStA Weimar, C 1624, fol. 135r.
10 Krüger 2021, p. 68.
11 LATh-HStA Weimar, C 1624, fol. 136r.
12 See Bayer 2001.
13 See Yurchenko 2021, p. 54, n. 2.
14 Cf. the essay by Gräfin von Brühl in this volume, pp. 73–77.
15 Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle n.d.
16 Stiftung Sammlung E.G. Bührle n.d.
17 The full title of the manifesto is *Gothaer Konferenz: Restitution und Ethik im europäischen Kontext. Eine Tagung der Kulturstiftung der Länder in Zusammenarbeit mit dem Deutschen Museumsbund gefördert von der Allianz Kulturstiftung 9. Dezember 2002*.
18 Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha 2024.
19 Proveana 2025a.
20 Karrels 2017; LootedArt 2011.
21 Pers. comm., 6 October 2026.
22 Massar 2009.
23 Massar 2010.
24 'Most of my drawings were "love at first sight".' Cf. Zafran 1985, p. 10.
25 The address is given in the files of the restitution (Wiedergutmachung) proceedings from 1966 onwards. See Proveana 2025b.
26 Zafran 1985, p. 10.
27 Jill Newhouse Gallery 2010.
28 Cf. CRLB I, pp. 213–219.
29 Cf. the essay by Trümper in this volume, p. 70.
30 Inv. 1721, fol. 166, no. 73c.
31 Cat. 1854; cat. 1890, no. 38.
32 FSG, file 3405.
33 See FSG, 3465b.
34 See FSG, 8354.
35 Inv. 1943, fol. 46.
36 LATh-HStA Weimar, C 1624, handover record, March 1945, Coburg.
37 See FSG, 'Verluste Moskau' [Moscow losses], written communications from Victor Brott (Editorial Associate, The Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod), 20 October 1964, and from A. M. C. Driessen-Deelen (Amsterdam), 5 September 1967.
38 Pers. comm., 25 October 2025.
39 Rotterdam 1953, cat. no. 30.
40 Dort 1956.
41 Pers. comm., 15 January 2025. Members of the Baer family state, however, that George Martin Baer (1936–2009) had already sold the work in the 1980s. This does not tally, however, with the fact that the family made the work available as a permanent loan between 1997 and 2003.



Friederike Gräfin von Brühl[1]

HOMECOMING FOR A WHILE AND FOR GOOD

There are works of art whose provenance is every bit as colourful and audacious as their subject matter. The oil sketches that Peter Paul Rubens created around 1620/1621 for the Jesuit church of St Charles Borromeo in Antwerp undoubtedly belong among them.

Five works, one ensemble, born of a single artistic idea. Acquired in 1802 by Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg and incorporated into the art collection at Friedenstein, they were torn apart and wrenched from their context in the 20th century. The sketches of *St Athanasius* and *St Basil* returned to Gotha as early as 1958: after the Red Army moved in, they had first been taken to the USSR, but were later restituted. The odyssey of the other three Rubens sketches, by contrast, was to prove considerably more complicated – and to last almost sixty years longer.

Now at last, in November 2026, the three missing works have come home and all five sketches are reunited: *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* and *St Gregory of Nazianzus* once again belong to the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha and will remain in Gotha permanently. *St Augustine*, at least, can be seen temporarily in its original home for six months.

A rescue that was no rescue

The story that led to this separation can only be explained by the turmoil of the final months of the Second World War. When the defeat of the German Reich became apparent in the spring of 1945, members of the ducal family of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha had the three Rubens sketches – together with numerous other works of art from Schloss Friedenstein – taken to Coburg.[2] The language of those involved at the time was a language of rescue: the treasures were to be brought to safety, out of reach of the advancing Red Army.

This narrative, which in retrospect may appear to be a gross misrepresentation, was certainly not pure invention at the time of the removal. The fear of looting and wartime loss was real, and at least

some of those involved will have shared it sincerely. As late as 4 July 1945, the then director of the Ducal Institutions for Art and Science, Eberhard Freiherr Schenk zu Schweinsberg, stated in a letter to the Lord Mayor of Gotha that the removal, which he had supported, was merely a 'temporary protective measure' that was 'in no way to affect the ownership of the objects removed from the site'.[3] The District Administrator (Landrat) of Gotha, however, recorded that it was precisely the objects of greatest market value that had been 'fished out' – an observer who already sensed at the time that more was at stake here than merely the location of the works.[4]

Sale on their own account

What had been declared a rescue in fact led to loss. None of the works taken to Coburg in 1945 found its way back to Gotha in the seven to eight decades that followed. On the contrary: soon after the end of the war, the three Rubens sketches were sold from within the ducal family on the international art market.
The *Augustine* sketch was offered for sale by the New York gallery E. & A. Silberman in 1953; the art dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt acquired it and sold it on in the same year to the Zurich collector Emil Bührle. In 1952, the *Elijah* took a similar route, via the same New York gallery, into the collection of the New York art collector Curtis O. Baer, and thereafter remained in the possession of his heirs for generations. Finally, the *Gregory* sketch was acquired in 1952 by the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo, New York, later the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, which was eventually renamed the Buffalo AKG Art Museum. Thus three pictures with the same provenance were scattered to the four winds – one to Zurich, the other two to the USA, all three far away from Gotha.

How serious is the breach of law?

Anyone wishing to understand the unlawfulness of these events and the violation of the public purpose to which these works were dedicated must look further back than 1945. As early as 1824, Duke Friedrich IV of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg had decreed in his will that the collections were to be preserved in Gotha 'for all future times', to serve the public and never to leave the city.[5] This wish was enshrined in the dynastic statutes of the ducal house in 1855 and definitively institutionalised in 1928, in the course of the expropriation of the princely houses: the art holdings passed to a specially founded, legally independent foundation, the Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft (Duke of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha Foundation for Art and Science) – the Kunststiftung for short. Its sole purpose was to preserve the collections and make them accessible to the public, 'in the previous manner and to the previous extent'.[6] Although Duke Carl Eduard managed its affairs as head of its board, he was bound

by duty to the foundation and its statutory purpose – not to his own fortune.

Against this background, the legal assessment of the removal and sale is unequivocal: in 1945, the *Augustine*, *Gregory* and *Elijah* sketches were the property of the Kunststiftung, and no member of the ducal family was entitled to take possession of them under the pretext of 'rescue' and later to sell them. When the assets of the Kunststiftung passed into the ownership of the people (Volkseigentum) with effect from 8 May 1945 on the basis of Allied and, subsequently, Thuringian expropriation legislation, this transfer also encompassed the claims for the restitution of the works that had already been removed. With the later establishment of the Stiftung Schloss Friedenstein, today's Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, this legal position, founded by the state, was transferred to an institution whose task once again lies in the preservation, research and public accessibility of the Gotha collections. It was therefore able to assert the restitution claims relating to the lost works and to conduct the negotiations for their return.

Alongside the provenance research and the accompanying legal opinions, another important basis for the restitution negotiations was the entry of the three sketches in the so-called Lost Art Database of the German Lost Art Foundation.[7] The works were thus 'contaminated', not in their artistic standing, but certainly in their market biography. Any resale would have entailed legal risks, reputational hazards and the prospect of renewed restitution claims. What in theory still commanded a price was, in practice, unsaleable on the reputable international art market. It is precisely here that the quiet power of the Lost Art Database in today's art-market practice becomes apparent. Although it did not itself bring the pictures back to Gotha, it deprived the market of the opportunity to leave their history behind once again through a further sale.[8]

Paths to reconciliation

That the pictures can today be reunited under one roof is owed not to a court ruling, but to the willingness of all parties to close an eighty-year-old wound not through further dispute, but through mutual understanding.

The Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha was able to reach an amicable settlement with the owners of the *Gregory* sketch as early as 2024. An agreement on the *Elijah* sketch was reached in the summer of 2026. In both cases, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation made it possible to re-acquire the works on terms that took account of their historical provenance from Gotha and the unlawfulness of their misappropriation, without imputing dishonest intentions to the negotiating partners in their own acquisition. In the late summer of 2026, negotiations then followed with the Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection in Zurich, which led to an amicable agreement on a six-month loan agreement for the *Augustine* sketch.

A gift of patience

With the joint presentation of all five Rubens sketches in November 2026, a circle that began almost 200 years earlier comes to a close. The three lost Rubens sketches are back in Gotha – not as trophies of a legal dispute, but as what they always were: testimonies to artistic mastery that Duke Friedrich IV, by his founding will, had dedicated to the public in Gotha as early as 1824. Anyone standing before these sketches today sees not only Rubens's virtuoso handling of light and movement, but also the history of a collection that has survived war, looting and sale and, thanks to patient restitution work, has been able to heal at least some of its old wounds.

This exhibition is therefore more than a reunion that is sensational in art-historical terms. It is an invitation to approach the past with vigilance and in a spirit of reconciliation, to document historical losses transparently and to negotiate problem cases with a view to finding solutions. The return of the works is a shared success for all those who have dedicated themselves to the long process of coming to terms with this history of loss, and a gift to the public, to whom the collection was dedicated from the very beginning.

Anmerkungen

1 Dr Friederike Gräfin von Brühl is a lawyer and partner at K&L Gates in Berlin. Together with Patrick Marré, lawyer and Senior Associate at K&L Gates in Berlin, she provided legal advice to the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha and the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation in the negotiations on the return of the three Rubens sketches, in close cooperation with Dr Tobias Pfeifer-Helke, Director of the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, and Dr Martin Hoernes, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation. The provenance research for the project was carried out in the early years by Anastasia Yurchenko and subsequently by Ronny Licht. Sincere thanks are extended here to everyone involved for their good, trusting and successful cooperation.

2 For a detailed account, see the much-cited article by Dörrzapf 2003, pp. 87–90.

3 Archive Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha.

4 Archive Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha.

5 Archive Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha. The will of Duke Friedrich IV of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg is invoked by Otto Geithner, administrative director of the Institution for Art and Science in Gotha, in his letter of 24 March 1946 to Marshal Zhukov, head of the Soviet Military Administration.

6 § 3 of the statutes of the Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft of 23 March 1928. Archive Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha.

7 Lost Art Database, https://www.lostart.de/de/start, accessed October 2026.

8 The legal background is formed by the judgments of the Federal Court of Justice (BGH, 21 July 2023 – V ZR 112/22, 'Kalabrische Küste') and of the Federal Administrative Court (BVerwG, 19 February 2015 – 1 C 13.14, BVerwGE 151, 228), both of which proceed from the premise that the entry of a work of art in the Lost Art Database, where based on true facts, cannot as a rule constitute an interference with the property of the current owner within the meaning of § 1004 of the German Civil Code (BGB), since the entry merely refers to the former ownership situation and makes the history of loss public. Consequently, neither is the scope of protection of Article 14(1) of the Basic Law (GG) affected (BVerwG), nor is a claim under § 1004 BGB established (BGH).



CATALOGUE
Five Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens

The five oil sketches were made in 1620/21 as preparatory designs for a total of 39 ceiling paintings in the Jesuit church of St Ignatius in Antwerp (now St Charles Borromeo). The plan was for ceiling paintings executed on canvas to adorn the galleries and aisles of the Baroque church. The oil sketches now in Gotha are among the few surviving autograph designs that Peter Paul Rubens made for this extensive decorative scheme, which is now lost.

The terms of the commission were set out on 29 March 1620 in a contract between Rubens and the superior of the Society of Jesus, Father Jacobus Tirinus. Rubens undertook to carry out the commission in less than a year. At the same time, he agreed to produce autograph oil sketches, which had to be submitted to the Jesuit fathers for approval. Payment was set at 7,000 thalers. The execution of the large-scale canvases based on the designs, by contrast, could be entrusted to workshop assistants, with Rubens responsible for the final reworking and improvements. The individual ceiling paintings measured about three by four metres.

The pictorial programme followed a complex theological concept. On the north and south galleries, nine scenes from the Old and New Testaments alternated, in keeping with the typological principle of thesis and antithesis. In the north and south aisles directly below, various male and female saints were depicted in octagonal and oval fields. With the exception of the Prophet Elijah, who was integrated into the programme of the upper gallery, the surviving oil sketches show saints from the circle of the four Latin and four Greek Fathers of the Church. In the context of the Counter-Reformation, this programme embodied the Jesuits' claim to act as guardians and defenders of the true faith. Because of their ascetic lives, their religious fervour and their self-sacrificing work, the Fathers of the Church were regarded as models of Christian conduct.

A characteristic feature of the oil sketches is the pronounced view from below (*di sotto in su*), which Rubens had already

perfected in his early years. The sky seems to be torn open, revealing the respective protagonist in each of the planned ceiling painting. Through the foreshortening and dynamic arrangement of the figures, the sketches were intended not merely as compositional designs; they already convey a first impression of how the paintings would look from the viewpoint of the churchgoers.

The painting technique, too, is typical of Rubens's working method. He first primed the wooden panels with a mixture of chalk, glue and lead white. This was followed by an ochre imprimatura, which he applied in streaks as the first thin layer of paint. He laid in the first broad underdrawing, with indications of shading, in heavily thinned Cassel earth. Several thinly applied glazing layers followed. He then accentuated the shadows with darker tones and added touches of more impasted colour and white highlights in places. Overall, Rubens worked up the oil sketches with great speed and visible assurance. The clearly discernible brushstrokes and the frequent wet-in-wet painting give them an immediate and spontaneous character.

The Gotha oil sketches owe their particular art-historical significance to their rarity, especially as the original ceiling paintings of the Antwerp Jesuit church no longer exist. They were destroyed on 18 July 1718 by a lightning strike and the fire that followed. Of the original designs, a total of 22 oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens survived. As direct primary documents of his artistic work, they are therefore of outstanding value for art-historical research. They afford insights not only into Rubens's working process, but also into an important ensemble of works that is now lost.

Besides the Gotha panels, the design of the original ceiling paintings is also documented by other surviving preparatory studies and reproductions. For individual motifs, before executing the oil sketches, Rubens made smaller grisaille studies in which he first developed the motifs in greatly simplified form, solely in brown with heightening in lead white. Nine of these studies survive today. In addition, there are numerous drawn and printed reproductions which, together with the oil sketches, allow the former ceiling paintings to be largely reconstructed.

These include the drawings by Jacob de Wit (1695–1754), who between 1711 and 1712, that is, before the paintings were destroyed, made a total of 36 chalk drawings after the ceiling paintings of the Jesuit church. The series, now in the British Museum in London, is one of the most important sources for the reconstruction of the lost programme. Further repetitions of these drawings were made in later years. Around 1750 the Amsterdam- born artist Jan Punt (1711–1779) adapted de Wit's models, with slight alterations, as engravings. The Dresden artist Christian Benjamin Müller (1690–1758) also documented the ceiling paintings. Only six months before the devastating fire, he visited the

Jesuit church and recorded the paintings in several drawings in red chalk, with the dark shadow areas washed in watercolour. This series is now in the collection of the Museum Plantin-Moretus in Antwerp. These drawings in turn served the Nuremberg painter and engraver Johann Justin Preissler (1698–1771) as models for 19 engravings, published in 1735.

The surviving oil sketches, grisaille studies, drawings and printed reproductions thus together form a multi-layered testimony to the former decoration of the Antwerp Jesuit church. Where the large-format originals are irretrievably lost, they make it possible to understand, at least in part, the original conception and effect of Rubens's monumental pictorial programme.

Cat. 1

St Athanasius
Peter Paul Rubens
c. 1620
Oil on oak panel
49.2 x 64.3 cm

Inscribed on the front: *S Athanasius* (top centre, autograph) and *ATHANAS* (banderole)
Marks on the reverse: brand marks of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke (two hands and a castle) and the ligated monogram *LS*

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG709

Provenance:
Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from the art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels
Confiscated by the Red Army in 1946 and taken to the Soviet Union
Restituted to Gotha by the Soviet Union in 1958

Inventories and catalogues:
Index 1826, sect. V, p. 47, no. 15 – Index 1844, pt V, p. 7, no. 15 – Cat. 1854, sect. IV, p. 13, no. 47 – Cat. [1855], p. 26, no. 47 – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 84 – Cat. 1883, p. 9, no. 84 – Cat. 1890, p. 9, no. 35; Cat. 2014, pp. 142–144, no. 61

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35, col. 84; Parthey 1864, vol. 2, pp. 420–421, no. 101; Rooses 1886/1977, vol. 1, p. 32, no. 19, p. 46; Rosenberg 1905, p. 199; Wurzbach, vol. 2, p. 494; Oldenbourg 1918, p. 43; Oldenbourg [1921], p. 208; Steinmeyer [1927], p. 12; Purgold/Schenk zu Schweinsberg 1937, p. 177; Thieme/Becker, vol. 31, p. 186; Van Puyvelde 1939, p. 30; Van Puyvelde 1948, p. 26, no. 2; Berlin 1958, E 144; Gotha 1959, no. 47; Burchard/d'Hulst 1963, vol. 1, pp. 222–223 (erroneously as in Chicago); CRLB I, pp. 126, 202–203, no. 19b, fig. 109; Held 1980, vol. 1, pp. 54–55., no. 27; vol. 2, pl. 28; Stelzer 1985, p. 438; Van Damme 1990, p. 208, no. 58; Eberle 2014, pp. 65–75; Büttner/Watteeuw 2023b, pp. 125–126

At the centre of the oil sketch stands St Athanasius over the heretic Arius, who lies on the ground. Towering upright, he props a thick book against his hip with his left hand, while with his right he raises a crozier like a spear and aims it at the chest of his defeated adversary. In triumph, he places his right foot on his opponent's body. His upright posture and the upward movement of the crozier lend the figure a pronounced dominance.

His vestments identify Athanasius as a high ecclesiastical dignitary. Over the white alb, gathered at the waist by a cincture, he wears a golden-yellow pallium. On his head sits a broad-brimmed galero over the hood of a dark brown mozzetta. A long brown cloak billows out behind him and heightens the impression of a forceful, powerful atmosphere.
Behind Athanasius hovers a winged putto carrying a banderole fluttering in the wind with the inscription 'ATHANAS', thus revealing to the viewer who the fig-



ure is. At the same time, the figure at the feet of the Father of the Church can thereby be identified as that of the heretic Arius. He, too, wears a greyish-white alb and seems to have only just fallen to the ground. This impression is reinforced by the strong foreshortening of the body, his two feet splayed apart and stretched upwards, and his right arm, which he has raised high above his face as if to protect himself from the saint's wrath.

Athanasius the Great (c. 295–373), one of the four Eastern Fathers of the Church, was already regarded in his lifetime as a resolute champion of the doctrine of the Trinity. After his ordination as deacon, he accompanied Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria to the First Council of Nicaea in 325. A major point of contention between Alexander and the priest Arius was the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son.

In 328, Athanasius was elected Bishop of Alexandria. In the following decades his opposition to Arianism repeatedly brought him into conflict with various emperors, and he spent some 17 years in exile. Even in his lifetime he received the epithet 'Father of Orthodoxy'.

The dark, almost black clouds surrounding Athanasius make the saint stand out all the more brightly. His figure alone seems to break through the darkness. Together with the depiction of St Gregory of Nazianzus, it is the most combative of



Fig. 40 Christian Benjamin Müller after Peter Paul Rubens: *St Athanasius Triumphing over Arius* (1718), black and red chalk, watercolour, 190 x 305 mm, City of Antwerp collection, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK.OT.00428



Fig. 41 Jan Punt after Jacob de Wit: *St Athanasius Triumphing over Arius* (1753), engraving, 337 x 401 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-66.366

the five Gotha oil sketches and at the same time serves as a metaphor for the victory of pure doctrine over the heresy of Arianism.

This metaphor of victory becomes particularly clear in the gesture of the foot placed on the defeated adversary. With this sign of physical superiority, Rubens takes up the ancient motif of the *calcatio*, which is already found in Roman imagery as an expression of dominion and as an important ceremonial element of imperial triumphs. In Christian iconography the motif is at the same time closely linked to the idea of Christ as *Christus victor* or *Christus militans*. Athanasius is thus presented not only as the theological adversary of Arius, but as a victorious champion of true doctrine. Rubens had already depicted a similar motif, for example in *The Victor's Triumph* (c. 1614), now in the Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister in Kassel.

Cat. 2

St Basil
Peter Paul Rubens
c. 1620
Oil on oak panel
49.5 x 64.4 cm

Inscribed on the front: *S. Basilius* (top centre, autograph)

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG710

Provenance:
Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from the art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels
Confiscated by the Red Army in 1946 and taken to the Soviet Union
Restituted to Gotha by the Soviet Union in 1958

Inventories and catalogues:
Index 1826, sect. V, p. 47, no. 13 – Index 1844, pt V, p. 7, no. 13 – Cat. 1854, sect. IV, p. 13, no. 46 – Cat. [1855], p. 26, no. 46 – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 83 – Cat. 1883, p. 9, no. 83 – Cat. 1890, p. 8, no. 34 and p. 120, n. 34–36; Cat. 2014, pp. 144–146, no. 62

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35, col. 84; Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 420, no. 100; Rosenberg 1905, p. 199; Wurzbach, vol. 2, p. 494; Brussels 1910, no. 361; Oldenbourg 1918, p. 43; Oldenbourg [1921], p. 208; Steinmeyer [1927], pp. 11–12; Purgold/Schenk zu Schweinsberg 1937, p. 177; Thieme/Becker, vol. 31, p. 186; Van Puyvelde 1939, p. 30; Van Puyvelde 1948, p. 26, no. 4; Berlin 1958, E 145; Gotha 1959, no. 48; Scheidig 1964, p. 62, p. 63 fig.; CRLB I, pp. 130–131, no. 21a; p. 203, fig. 115; Rooses 1886/1977, vol. 1, p. 33, no. 21, p. 46; Antwerp 1977, p. 121, no. 48; Berlin 1985, p. 347, no. 343 (erroneously as oil on fir panel); Held 1980, vol. 1, pp. 35, 57, no. 31; vol. 2, pl. 33; Stelzer 1985, pp. 438, 441; Timm 1993, pp. 45–47; Schuttwolf 2004, pp. 176–177, 185–186, no. 13.4, col. pl. XX; Timm 2005, pp. 21–23; Schweers 2008, vol. 7, p. 384; Büttner/Watteeuw 2023b, p. 126

St Basil kneels at the centre of the picture on a cloud, transported in religious ecstasy. His gaze is turned heavenwards, his arms spread wide. Above him hovers a naked winged putto with a billowing cloth, its right arm poised in the air directly above the saint's head. In front of the saint lie two books, one of them open. A third open book is merely hinted at in the cloud below and seems to merge with it. The books allude to the saint's great learning and his importance as a theological author. At the upper edge of the picture the image is inscribed 'S. Basilius'.
St Basil (c. 330–379), also called Basil the Great, is not only one of the four Great Greek Church Fathers, but also, together with Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory of Nazianzus, one of the so-called three Cappadocian Fathers. After his education in Caesarea, Constantinople and



Athens, he turned to the monastic life and founded his own monastic order in the wilderness of Neocaesarea, today Niksar in Turkey. Elected Bishop of Caesarea in 370, he took a resolute stand against Arianism under Emperor Valens (328–378) and defended the doctrine of the Trinity. Soon after his death he was venerated as a saint, and in 1568, he was officially elevated to Father of the Church by the Catholic Church.

He wears the plain black habit of a monk rather than episcopal vestments – an allusion to his asceticism and his monastic foundation in the wilderness of Neocaesarea. St Basil's open gesture of prayer is also found in the altarpiece *The Miracles of St Ignatius* in the church of Sant'Ambrogio in Genoa, which Rubens had painted a few months earlier.

A striking colour contrast to the otherwise grey and black palette is provided by the twisted Solomonic column (*columna salomonica*) on the left-hand side of the picture, with its golden-yellow ground tone and orange-red accents. Its depiction goes back to a legend from the life of St Ephrem the Syrian (c. 306–373), who is said to have seen in a divine vision a pillar of fire reaching up to heaven, whereupon a voice revealed to him that this pillar represented Basil the Great. Rubens also used a comparable twisted column in the oil sketch *The Martyrdom of St Lucy*, now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper in France.



Fig. 42 Christian Benjamin Müller after Peter Paul Rubens: *St Basil* (1718), black and red chalk, watercolour, 190 x 305 mm, City of Antwerp collection, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK. OT.00423



Fig. 43 Jan Punt after Jacob de Wit: *St Basil* (1754), engraving, 340 x 408 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-66.365

Cat. 3

St Gregory of Nazianzus

Peter Paul Rubens
c. 1620
Oil on oak panel
49.4 x 64.8 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG1506

Provenance:
Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from the art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels
Illegally removed to Coburg by the ducal family in 1945 and sold there
Documented in the trade with E. & A. Silberman Galleries, New York, in 1952; sold in the same year to the Albright Art Gallery (predecessor of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, later the Buffalo AKG Art Museum)
Re-acquired by the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha in 2024 with the support of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation

Inventories and catalogues:
Index 1826, no. 19 – Cat. 1854, no. 48 – Cat. 1890, p. 9, no. 36 – Inv. 1943, fol. 44; Cat. 2014, p. 244, no. V165

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35, col. 84; Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 420, no. 98; Rooses 1886/1977, vol. 1, p. 35, no. 25; Rosenberg 1905, p. 200; Brussels 1910, no. 363; Oldenbourg [1921], p. 207 fig., 475; Steinmeyer [1927], p. 12; Brussels 1937, pp. 72–73, no. 68; Van Puyvelde 1948, p. 26, no. 6; Rotterdam 1953, p. 56, no. 27, fig. 32; Burchard/d'Hulst 1963, vol. 1, p. 223; Bernhard 1965, p. 128; CRLB I, pp. 142–144, no. 25b, fig. 134; Antwerp 1977, p. 119 fig.; Held 1980, vol. 1, pp. 60–61, no. 36; vol. 2, pl. 37; Schuttwolf 2011, p. 107, no. 344

The picture shows St Gregory fighting a demonic creature. He stands on a dark cloud, firmly braced on his right leg, his foot projecting slightly over its edge. Facing the viewer frontally, he turns his upper body slightly towards the left side of the picture. The saint wears episcopal vestments: over the long alb lie the surplice and the pallium. The colour of the garments is difficult to determine, as at first glance it appears to shift between greyish white and golden yellow. On his head sits a golden mitre, its lappets fluttering in the wind. Gregory seems to keep his balance with his outstretched left arm, while with his right hand he swings back above his head, gripping a golden crozier like a spear. His target is the gaping maw of the winged demon to his left.

The demonic creature is naked and has a human torso, while its hairy lower limbs recall those of a lion. The body is seen from behind and in a suggested



twist, which makes the movement of the fall appear particularly vivid. One of the beast-like paws still touches the cloud on which Gregory stands, revealing that the demon has only just been thrust down from it. Its cat-like, monstrous face is crowned by a kind of narrow red crest and contorted into an angry scream. The creature has raised its right arm defensively, the fist clenched. Flickering flames seem to leap from its maw. It remains open whether they are to be understood as an immediate reaction to the threatened thrust of the crozier or as the result of a wound already inflicted.

Above the two adversaries hovers a winged putto holding a banderole. The inscription once on it has now largely faded and is difficult to decipher. It is likely that, as on the oil sketch of Athanasius, it identified the saint by name.

St Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–390) is one of the three Cappadocian Fathers. He received a comprehensive education in Caesarea, Alexandria and Athens, where he met St Basil, later his close friend. The two were united not only by a lifelong friendship but at times also by a shared aspiration to an ascetic life in the wilderness. In 372, at the instigation of Basil, who had meanwhile risen to become Bishop of Caesarea, Gregory was consecrated Bishop of Sasima, but he never took up office there and remained in Nazianzus instead. Gregory gained particular importance from 379 onwards



Fig. 44 Christian Benjamin Müller after Peter Paul Rubens: *St Gregory of Nazianzus* (1718), black and red chalk, watercolour, 190 x 305 mm, City of Antwerp collection, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK.OT.00427



Fig. 45 Jan Punt after Jacob de Wit: *St Gregory of Nazianzus* (1751), engraving, 338 x 408 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-66.353

in Constantinople, then dominated by Arianism, where he was appointed bishop and vehemently championed the doctrine of the Trinity. His famous five Theological Orations, in which he defended the divinity of Jesus Christ, later earned him the epithet 'the Theologian'. In 381 he took part in the Council of Constantinople, but resigned his office as bishop in the same year and withdrew to Nazianzus.

The depiction of the struggle between Gregory and the demon is iconographically unusual, as it cannot be traced back to a specific episode in the saint's life. Rather, Rubens here visualises a theological conflict: the bishop's struggle against the powers of heresy. The depiction thus stands in direct relation to that of St Athanasius in the same cycle. Whereas Athanasius overpowers the person of Arius, and thus the founding figure of that heretical movement himself, Gregory confronts its demonic embodiment. The struggle is thereby raised from the historical dispute to a timeless, allegorical plane.



At the same time, the depiction of the demon belongs to an overarching pictorial tradition within Rubens's work. Comparable devilish figures appear, for instance, in the oil sketch of St Michael defeating Satan, or in *The Fall of the Rebel Angels* in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Particularly striking is the repetition of certain motifs of movement: in both cases there is a figure that has fallen to the ground, raising an arm defensively over its head.

Compared with the other Gotha oil sketches, the unusually restrained colouring of this panel is striking. This is directly related to its comparatively low degree of painterly finish. Large areas around the figure of the saint leave the streaky ochre imprimatura exposed. Only individual passages – such as the dark clouds, the rosy flesh of the putto or the golden attributes of the bishop – provide sparing accents of colour. In its painterly restraint, the oil sketch thus comes close to the grisaille designs that Rubens made in preparation for the ceiling paintings even before the oil sketches. At the same time, through its few deliberately placed accents of colour and its rapid brushstrokes, it retains the character of a first design, a *prima idea*. The panel thus occupies a special place within the Gotha group and shows particularly vividly how Rubens could vary between summary underdrawing and a painterly, worked-up design.

Cat. 4

The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot

Peter Paul Rubens
c. 1620
Oil on oak panel
32.5 x 44 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. 1528

Provenance:
Formerly in the collection of Herman de Neyt, Antwerp
Before 1721 possibly in the collection of Gustav Adolf von Gotter (1692–1762)
Acquired under Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732)
Illegally removed to Coburg by the ducal family in 1945 and sold there
Documented in the trade with E. & A. Silberman, New York, in 1952; sold in the same year to the private collection of Curtis O. Baer in New Rochelle (New York) and passed to the collection of George M. Baer in Atlanta (Georgia)
Later in the collection of the descendants of Curtis O. Baer in New York
On loan to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from 1997 to 2003
Re-acquired by the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha in 2026 with the support of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1721, fol. 166, no. 73C – Inv. 1764, fol. 94r, no. 69 – Cat. 1890, p. 9, no. 38 – Inv. 1943, fol. 46 – Cat. 2014, pp. 244–245, no. V167

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35, col. 78; Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 417, no. 16; Rooses 1886/1977, vol. 1, no. 15; Rosenberg 1905, p. 197; Brussels 1910, no. 365; Oldenbourg [1921], p. 210; fig., 475; Steinmeyer [1927], p. 12; Brussels 1937, p. 71, no. 66, pl. X; Van Puyvelde 1939, pp. 31, 84, no. 35, fig. 35; Van Puyvelde 1948, p. 27, no. 25, p. 75, no. 35, fig. 35; Rotterdam 1953, p. 57, no. 30, fig. 30; Bernhard 1965, p. 128, fig. 135; CRLB I, pp. 104–105, no. 15a, fig. 81; Held 1980, vol. 1, p. 46, no. 15; vol. 2, pl. 16; Schuttwolf 2011, pp. 107–108, no. 346; Büttner 2026, pp. 182, 185

The oil sketch shows the Prophet Elijah seated in a golden chariot drawn across the sky by two fiery horses. Turning his upper body, the prophet faces the viewer. The red garment he wears draws the viewer's eye directly to his figure. He has stretched out both arms wide, as if struggling to keep his balance during the headlong ride. His expression seems startled at the miracle taking place before his eyes. In his left hand, Elijah holds his prophet's mantle, fluttering in the wind, which he is on the point of losing. The two-wheeled golden chariot, decorated with a shell-shaped ornament, seems modelled on an ancient biga, but is shown the other way round, with the open side to the front and the closed back to the rear.

The depiction refers to a story from the Second Book of Kings in the Old Testament. As Elijah and his successor Elisha



walked along the Jordan deep in conversation, a mighty whirlwind suddenly arose and a chariot drawn by fiery horses appeared. It drove between the two men and parted them. The prophet was taken up and thereupon ascended into heaven – in Christian art a popular typological counterpart to the Ascension of Christ or, as in the case of the Antwerp Jesuit church, to the Assumption of the Virgin. The mantle that Elijah lost during this manoeuvre was taken up by Elisha, who later worked miracles of his own with it.

Although the composition follows a diagonal that descends towards the horses, the strong view of the figures from below nevertheless conveys the impression of an ascent and lets the viewer share directly in the event. Of the two horses, only the one in front is clearly worked up, while the one behind is merely suggested. The warmer ground tone of the oil sketch supports the thematic and atmospheric effect of the fire motif.

Particularly impressive is Rubens's attention to detail, evident not only in Elijah's wind-tousled hair but also in the deliberately blurred depiction of the spinning chariot wheels. The fieriness of the horses is emphasised by the wild mane, which streams around the head of the front horse like flickering flames and was applied wet-in-wet with thick,



Fig. 46 Christian Benjamin Müller after Peter Paul Rubens: *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* (1718), black and red chalk, watercolour, 198 x 305 mm, City of Antwerp collection, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK.OT.00407



Fig. 47 Jan Punt after Jacob de Wit: *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot* (1750), engraving, 336 x 397 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-66.327

sweeping brushstrokes. At the same time, a bright jet of fire seems to stream directly from the horse's nostrils. The prophet himself, too, is surrounded by pale yellow flames that seem to radiate from his figure.

These deliberately chosen pictorial elements and the sweeping, dynamic brushwork create a high degree of vitality and make this sketch stand out from the rest of the oil sketches made for the Antwerp Jesuit church.

Cat. 5

St Augustine
Peter Paul Rubens
c. 1620
Oil on oak panel
48 x 63.5 cm

Inscribed on the front, centre: *S. Augustinus*
Marks on the reverse: brand marks of the Antwerp Guild of St Luke (two hands and a castle)

Foundation E.G. Bührle Collection, on permanent loan to the Kunsthaus Zürich
Inv. no. BU 0160

Provenance:
Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from the art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels
Illegally removed to Coburg by the ducal family in 1945 and sold there
Documented in the trade with E. & A. Silberman Galleries, New York, in 1952
Sold in 1953 by the Swiss art dealer Walter Feilchenfeldt to Emil G. Bührle in Zurich
Today on permanent loan from the Emil G. Bührle Collection to the Kunsthaus Zürich

Inventories and catalogues:
Index 1826, no. 17 – Inv. 1854, no. 49 – Cat. 1890, p. 9, no. 37 – Inv. 1943, fol. 45; Cat. 2014, p. 244, no. V166

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35, col. 84; Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 420, no. 99; Rooses 1886/1977, vol. 1, p. 37, no. 30; Rosenberg 1905, p. 201; Brussels 1910, no. 364; Oldenbourg [1921], p. 209; Steinmeyer [1927], p. 12; Brüssel 1937, pp. 69–70, no. 63; Van Puyvelde 1939, p. 31; Van Puyvelde 1948, p. 27, no. 24; Bernhard 1965, p. 128; CRLB I, p. 158, no. 30a, fig. 162; Held 1980, vol. 1, p. 55, no. 28; vol. 2, pl. 3; Schuttwolf 2011, p. 107, no. 345

The picture shows St Augustine in religious adoration. He kneels on a cloud and is seen in profile. His left arm is bent, the hand raised palm open in a gesture of prayer. His right hand he stretches towards heaven, holding a red heart pierced by an arrow. His gaze is directed expectantly upwards and seems wholly concentrated on the heavenly vision beyond the picture space. Augustine wears a striking golden cope, the liturgical vestment of the Western Church, with a richly embroidered orphrey and a long hood. The golden tone of the vestment stands out clearly against the dark, almost black clouds at the edges of the picture and lends the centre of the picture a warm, orange hue.
The Father of the Church is surrounded by three winged putti, who both accompany and enliven his rapture. The putto on his left clings to his shoulder, while the one on the right tries to pull the saint upwards by his sleeve. A third child angel sits on the cloud to his right and is cheekily putting the golden mitre on his own head. In doing so, he has casually laid his left leg over Augustine's crozier, which



lies carelessly on the cloud. The playful behaviour of the putti contrasts delightfully with the saint's religious absorption. The insignia of episcopal power lying on the ground seem to have been deliberately left behind.

The motif of the heart pierced by an arrow alludes to Augustine's mystical love of God. It goes back to a passage in his *Confessiones* in which he describes the longing for God with the image of a heart wounded by divine love: 'Sagittaveras tu cor nostrum caritate tua' ('You had pierced our heart with your love'). In art, particularly in the Baroque, this motif became a symbol of the passionate devotion and inner rapture of the Father of the Church.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430) is one of the most important Fathers of the Latin Western Church. After a turbulent youth and his conversion to Christianity, he was consecrated Bishop of the city of Hippo Regius, near present-day Annaba in Algeria, in 395. As a theologian he had a lasting influence on the development of the Western Church, not least through his conviction that only God's unmerited grace, not one's own deeds, can redeem man from sin. His most important writings include the *Confessiones* and *De civitate Dei*. His works had an impact far beyond late antiquity and influenced medieval theology as well as the intellectual world of the early modern period. The Jesuits revered him as an outstand-



Fig. 48 Christian Benjamin Müller after Peter Paul Rubens: *St Augustine* (1718), black and red chalk, watercolour, 190 x 305 mm, City of Antwerp collection, Museum Plantin-Moretus, inv. no. PK.OT.00407



Fig. 49 Jan Punt after Jacob de Wit: *St Augustine* (1751), engraving, 338 x 407 mm, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, inv. no. RP-P-OB-66.354

ing teacher and defender of the Christian faith.

The depiction of St Augustine shows clear parallels with that of St Basil, with whom he formed a counterpart in the pictorial programme. Both Fathers of the Church kneel on clouds and are wholly absorbed in religious rapture and contemplation. The books, too, establish a deliberate correspondence: the open book on the cloud beneath Augustine corresponds to the pile of books at Basil's feet. While the books allude to the learning of both men, Augustine's pierced heart additionally emphasises the emotional and mystical dimension of his relationship with God.

Additional Rubens works in Gotha

Cat. 6

The Garden of Love
Circle of Peter Paul Rubens
After 1632
Oil on oak panel
72 x 108 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG62

Provenance:
Acquired in 1720 under Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732) for 800 thalers from Pechmann in Leipzig

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1721, p. 515, no. 185 (as Rubens) – Inv. 1733, p. 254, no. 185 – Inv. 1764, fol. 129v, no. 185 – Inv. 1826, sect. V, p. 46, no. 11 (as Peter Paul Rubens) – Inv. 1844, pt V, p. 3, no. 11 – Cat. 1854, sect. IV, p. 13, no. 42 – Cat. [1855], p. 25, no. 42 – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 87 – Cat. 1883, p. 9, no. 87 – Cat. 1890, pp. 9-10, no. 39 (as copy after Rubens) and p. 120, n. 39 – Cat. 2014, pp. 149–152, no. 63

Literature:
Keyßler 1741, p. 1135 (as Peter Paul Rubens); Galletti 1779, vol. 2, p. 269 (as Peter Paul Rubens); Fiorillo 1818, vol. 3, p. 19 (as copy after Rubens); Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 50 (as copy after Rubens); Parthey 1864, vol. 2, p. 430, no. 290; Rooses 1890/1977, vol. 4, p. 65; Burchard 1963, p. 432; Glang-Süberkrüb 1975, p. 98c; 169, fig. 17; Gotha 2007, p. 118, no. 17; Rohrmüller 2007, p. 54, fig. 1; pp. 55-56; Voermann 2012, p. 350; CRLB XVII, pp. 84–85

Elegant ladies and gentlemen meet in a magnificent garden. Cupids, doves, roses, a fountain with Venus and the Three Graces surround the gathering. A elaborately decorated garden pavilion forms the background. The picture shows love, seduction and courtly sociability. The numerous symbols of love, such as a bow and arrow, torch, yoke and dog, allude to courtship, marriage, fidelity and fulfilment. The groups of figures can be understood as different stages in the development of love.
Rubens's *Garden of Love* can also be understood as a so-called *Conversatie à la mode*, that is, as a depiction of courtly society and convivial entertainment. Flirtation, conversation, music and playful amusements show the social conventions and the courtship of elegant society in the 17th century.
The Gotha *Garden of Love* largely follows Rubens's larger version of c. 1632/35 in the Prado in Madrid and occupies a special position among the smaller copies. Although the painting can be attributed neither to Rubens nor to his workshop, it was probably produced within their immediate sphere of influence. The panel bears a guild mark on the reverse and



was made by a professional panel maker. The whitish chalk ground with a streaky, silver-grey imprimatura likewise corresponds to the technical practice customary in Rubens's workshop. In content and composition, this version follows the Prado original closely, yet displays distinctive compositional variations and does not seem to depend directly on other copies. Despite its high painterly quality, it has not yet been possible to attribute it to a specific artist.

Cat. 7

Pastoral Scene

Circle of Peter Paul Rubens (partial copy)
After 1638
Oil on canvas
159 x 190,7 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG1073

Provenance:
Documented in the picture gallery at Schloss Friedenstein in Gotha since 1826

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1826, sect. V, p. 47, no. 16 (as Peter Paul Rubens) – Inv. 1844, pt V, p. 7, no. 16 – Cat. 1854, sect. IV, p. 7, no. 24 – Cat. [1855], p. 24, no. 24 (as school of Rubens) – Cat. 1868, p. 9, no. 82 (as Rubens) – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 82 (as Peter Paul Rubens) – Cat. 1883, p. 9, no. 82 – Cat. 1890, p. 10, no. 41 (as Rubens workshop) and p. 120, n. 41 – Inv. 1924–27, p. 210, ch. XI, no. 41 (as school of Rubens) – Cat. 2014, pp. 152–155, no. 64

Literature:
Smith 1829–42, II, p. 156, no. 544; Nagler 1835–52, XIII, p. 585 (as perhaps by Jordaens); Van Hasselt 1840, p. 351, no. 1216; Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 51, cols 89/90 (as probably Jordaens); Rooses 1890/1977, vol. 4, p. 78; Steinmeyer [1927], pp. 3, 12; Renger/Denk 2002, p. 447; Gotha 2007, pp. 119-120, no. 19 (animals, landscape and sky by Frans Snyders); Rohrmüller 2007, p. 55, fig. 2; p. 56; CRLB XVII, pp. 175 and 184 (circle of Rubens)

In a broad Arcadian landscape, a shepherd passionately embraces a young shepherdess. The muscular man, clad only in a pelt, wears an ivy wreath and carries a bagpipe. The woman in the red dress reacts both defensively and coquettishly. Sheep, a crook and the landscape heighten the pastoral character of the scene.

The picture combines the ideal of Arcadian nature with a distinctly erotic pastoral game. The entwined bodies and legs, the bared breast and the woman's coquettish pose point to mutual desire. The wild shepherd embodies unbridled passion; the bagpipe symbolically underlines the sensual and physical dimension. In 17th-century Netherlandish art and literature, the motif of shepherd and shepherdess was closely associated with love, seduction and erotic play. The couple can probably be understood as the shepherd pair Coridon and Silvia, known from literature.

The Gotha painting is a partial copy after Peter Paul Rubens's *Pastoral Scene* of about 1638, now in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich. Whereas Rubens originally



depicted the figures as a tightly framed group in a relatively closed picture field, the anonymous painter of the Gotha version extended the composition with sheep, a tree stump, landscape and sky. The motif was thereby transferred into a landscape format and embedded more firmly in an Arcadian landscape. Stylistically, the Gotha version follows the vigorous colouring and the loose, free brushwork of the late Rubens. Although the painting cannot be attributed directly to Rubens, it was probably produced in the orbit of his workshop, most likely only after the artist's death. The Gotha version, evidently very well known in the 18th century, also served Jean-Jacques Avril as the model for an engraving published in 1781. Its impact thus rested not only on the popular subject but also on its particular technical and painterly quality.

Cat. 8

Landsknecht with a Girl and an Old Woman

Follower of Peter Paul Rubens
After 1638
Oil on Canvas
89.5 x 83.5 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG838

Provenance:
Documented in the Gotha Kunstkammer since 1717 – probably entered the collection under Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732)

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1717, fol. 149v (without artist) – Inv. 1721, p. 513, no. 172 – Inv. 1733, p. 252, no. 172 – Inv. 1764, fol. 128v, no. 172 – Inv. 1826, sect. V, p. 48, no. 22 (as unknown) – Inv. 1844, pt V, p. 11, no. 22 – Cat. 1854, sect. IV, p. 11, no. 39 – Cat. [1855], p. 25, no. 39 (as school of Rubens) – Cat. 1868, p. 9, no. 92 – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 92 (as after Rubens) – Cat. 1883, p. 10, no. 92 – Cat. 1890, p. 10, no. 40 (as copy after Rubens) and p. 120, n. 40 (after an original in Turin) – Inv. 1924–27, p. 193, ch. XI, no. 40 (as school of Rubens) – Cat. 2014, pp. 155–156, no. 65

Literature:
Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 51 (as a poor German painter); Rooses 1890/1977, vol. 4, p. 79; Schuttwolf 2007, p. 99 (as Theodor Rombouts); Gotha 2007, pp. 116-117, no. 15 (as Judith and Holofernes); Schweers 2008, vol. 7, p. 384; Voermann 2012, p. 350; CRLB XVII, pp. 165–166 and n. 11 (possibly from the collection of Joachim von Sandrart)

A soldier embraces a young woman who leans towards him in apparent resistance. Secretly she reaches for the hilt of his sword. Behind the couple, an old woman with a gleeful face watches the scene.
The depiction can be interpreted as a soldier's encounter with a courtesan; the old woman could be acting as a procuress. The secret grasp at the sword and the old woman may at the same time allude to the story of Judith and Holofernes. An unambiguous identification, however, is not possible.
The composition goes back to Rubens's *Pastoral Scene* of about 1638 in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Rubens's original motif was frequently varied as a mercenary with a girl and disseminated through an engraving by Reinier van Persijn. The Gotha painting adopts this variant, with the old woman in the background.



Cat. 9

The Martyrdom of St Lawrence

Follower of Peter Paul Rubens
After 1615
Oil on Canvas
49 x 61.5 cm

Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha
Inv. no. SG459

Provenance:
Formerly owned by Gustav Adolf von Gotter (1692–1762)
Documented in the Kunstkammer of the Dukes of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg from 1721

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1721, p. 167 (posthumously as a sketch by Rubens) – Inv. 1733, p. 177, no. 68 (as Rubens) – Inv. 1764, fol. 94r, no. 68 (as copy after Rubens) – Inv. 1826, sect. V, p. 46, no. 12 (as Peter Paul Rubens) – Inv. 1844, pt XII, p. 31, no. 48 (as unknown) – Cat. 1854, sect. VI, p. 1, no. 6 (as copy after Rubens) – Cat. [1855], p. 26, no. 54 (as after Rubens) – Cat. [1880], p. 9, no. 91 – Cat. 1883, p. 10, no. 91 – Cat. 1890, p. 16, no. 74 (as unknown) and p. 121, n. 74 (after Rubens) – Cat. 2014, p. 221, no. A17

Literature:
Rathgeber 1835, p. 323 (as copy after Rubens); Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 35; Rooses 1888/1977, vol. 2, p. 318; Schuttwolf 2007, p. 105; Voermann 2012, p. 355

St Lawrence is forced onto a burning gridiron by his executioners. A priest points to the statue of Jupiter and urges him to renounce his faith. A Roman emperor watches the scene, while two angels appear with a laurel wreath.
The scene shows Lawrence's steadfastness in the face of martyrdom. The contrast between the Christian faith and the Roman pagan worship is made clear by Jupiter and the heavenly angels. The laurel wreath symbolises the martyr's victory and his eternal life.
The picture was based on Rubens's *Martyrdom of St Lawrence* of about 1615 in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich. Rubens, in turn, drew on Titian's depictions of the same subject. The Gotha version differs in details from Rubens's composition and the engraving of it by Lucas Vorsterman, and is to be regarded as a later German copy.



Losses

Cat. 10

The Battle of Amazons
Copy after Peter Paul Rubens
17th century
Oil on oak panel
99 x 113 cm

Lost

Provenance:
Documented in the Kunstkammer of the Dukes of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg from 1717
Present whereabouts unknown

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1717, fol. 199r – Inv. 1764, fol. 203v, no. 28 – Cat. 1868, IV, no. 27 – Cat. 1883, no. 89 – Cat. 1890, p. 10, no. 43 and p. 120, n. 43 – Cat. 2014, p. 245, no. V169

Literature:
Rathgeber 1840, p. 40; Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 40; Bernhard 1965, p. 128; Schuttwolf 2011, p. 108, no. 348; Voermann 2012, p. 350; Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, pp. 223; 384 and vol. 2, p. 176

According to the note in cat. 1890: 'Small copy after the picture in Munich, Aelt. Pinakothek no. 742.'

Cat. 11

Venus before the Bath

School of Peter Paul Rubens
17th century
Oil on oak panel
146 x 113 cm

Lost

Provenance:
Documented in the Kunstkammer of the Dukes of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg from 1717
Present whereabouts unknown

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1717, fol. 123r – Inv. 1764, fol. 114r, no. 1 – Cat. 1890, p. 20, no. 94 and p. 121, n. 94 – Inv. 1943, fol. 89 – Cat. 2014, p. 247, no. V170

Literature:
Rathgeber 1840, pp. 144–145 (as Jacob Jordaens); Steinmeyer [1927], p. 12; Bernhard 1965, p. 128; Schuttwolf 2011, pp. 108–109, no. 349; Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, pp. 194; 322 and vol. 2, p. 174



Cat. 12

Neptune and Amphitrite

Copy after Peter Paul Rubens
17th century
Oil on canvas
71 x 87 cm

Lost

Provenance:
Private collection of Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha (1818–1893)
Present whereabouts unknown

Inventories and catalogues:
Cat. 1883, no. 88 – Cat. 1890, p. 10, no. 42 and p. 120, n. 42 – Cat. 2014, p. 247, no. V168

Literature:
Bernhard 1965, p. 128; Schuttwolf 2011, p. 108, no. 347; Voermann 2012, p. 350

According to the note in cat. 1890: 'Small widened copy from the end of the 17th century after the picture in Berlin, no. 779 A, purchased as Jordaens and Snyders. Cf. J. Meyer in Jahrb. der Kgl. preuss. Kunstsammlungen II, p. 113'

Cat. 13

The Martyrdom of St Lawrence

Frans Francken the Younger
after Peter Paul Rubens
117th century
Oil on copper
33 x 22 cm

Lost

Provenance:
Documented in the collection from 1826 – acquired under Duke Ernst I of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha
Sold to the Galerie Schumann, Frankfurt am Main, in 1936, but nevertheless still photographed by the museum photographer Rose Heidl in 1937
Transferred to the library in 1940; the painting was restored in 1941
Present whereabouts unknown

Inventories and catalogues:
Inv. 1826, XII, no. 48 – Cat. 1868, p. 22, no. 6 – Cat. 1890, p. 16, no. 75 and p. 120, n. 75 (after Rubens, perhaps German) – Inv. 1943, fol. 73 – Cat. 2014, p. 233, no. V63

Literature:
Rathgeber 1835, p. 323; Rathgeber 1844, IV, p. 36; Bernhard 1965, p. 125 (as manner of Frans Francken II); Schuttwolf 2011, p. 65, no. 137 (as Frans Francken the Younger); Voermann 2012, p. 342; Dettmann/Strehlau 2021, vol. 1, p. 308 and vol. 2, p. 194

After Rubens's *The Martyrdom of St Lawrence* (c. 1613/14) in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich, inv. no. 338





INVENTORIES AND CATALOGUES OF PAINTINGS FROM THE GOTHA COLLECTION

Inventory 1717
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Inventory 1721
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Inventory 1764
Inventarium über die Herzogl. Kunst-Cammer auf Friedenstein Anno 1764, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, archive (unprinted).

Inventory 1924–27
Inventarverzeichnis Friedenstein, Gotha 1924–1927, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, archive (unprinted).

Inventory 1943
Katalog der Herzoglichen Gemäldegalerie Juli 1943, Blatt 1–648, Coburg, Herzog von Sachsen Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaften, archive (unprinted, collection of loose handwritten sheets).

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Heinrich Justus Schneider, *Katalog der Gemälde-Gallerie*, Gotha 1854, Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, archive (unprinted).

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Heinrich Justus Schneider, *Die Herzogliche Gemälde-Gallerie zu Gotha*, Gotha [1855].

Catalogue 1868
Heinrich Justus Schneider, *Die Herzogliche Gemälde-Gallerie zu Gotha*, Gotha 1868.

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Catalogue 1883
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Nils Büttner/Sandra Diefenthaler (ed.), *Becoming Famous. Peter Paul Rubens* (exh. cat. Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart, 2021–2022), Dresden 2021.

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