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Est. 1760



Sir Peter Paul Rubens
(Siegen 1577 – 1640 Antwerp)

The Adoration of the Magi

oil on panel
38.1 x 31.7 cm.;
15 x 12½ in.

Provenance

Private collection, Virginia (by descent in the same family for three generations);
By whom sold, New York, Christie's, 6 June 2012, lot 82;
Where acquired by a private collection, North America;
By whom sold, London, Christie's, 9 July 2014, lot 163, where acquired by the present owner.

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This unpublished panel constitutes an exciting new discovery and an important addition to the corpus of oil sketches by Sir Peter Paul Rubens. A powerful compositional study executed with the bold confidence and refined brushwork that defines Rubens's painting on this scale, it relates to a large canvas painted by the master *c.* 1626 – 1627 for the high altar of the Cloister of the Annunciation in Brussels (fig. 1). The altarpiece was most likely commissioned by Barbara-Maria Boonen (d. 1629), the widow of Pieter Peck (Peckius or Pecquius) (1562 – 1625).¹ Pieter Peck had a distinguished career at the court of the Archdukes, serving as ambassador to the King of France, Henri IV, and later as Chancellor of the Sovereign Council of Brabant in 1616. He was also a benefactor of the Convent of the Annunciation, which was founded that same year, and three of his daughters would reside there. The Chancellor met Rubens on several occasions, and, in fact, sometime in the second decade of the seventeenth century, the artist painted his portrait (Fareham, Hampshire, Southwick House, Mrs. H.F.P. Borthwick-Norton), possibly on the occasion of his appointment as Chancellor.² In 1777, the Cloister of the Annunciation would sell Rubens's altarpiece to Louis XIV of France, and it is now displayed in the Louvre, Paris.

The Adoration of the Magi was frequently interpreted by Rubens throughout his career: he painted this subject more often than any other story from the life of Christ, and over a dozen large paintings by his hand dedicated to this theme survive.³ As recounted in the Gospel of Matthew 2:11, three wise men from the East followed a star in search of the King of the Jews. They were directed by Herod to Bethlehem, where they delivered gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to the newborn Christ Child. Rubens's earliest treatment of the story dates to about 1602 and is now in a private collection in Belgium. Shortly after producing this sketch, Rubens created a larger oil study in the Groninger Museum in Groningen which ultimately served as the model for a large canvas for the Statenkamer of Antwerp's Town Hall (today in the Prado, Madrid). In the Prado *Adoration*, we see many of the compositional devices that Rubens further developed in the present sketch, such as the standing Virgin at the far left. Mary is portrayed with a bent knee, a pose that might derive from Annunciation scenes, where she is customarily shown kneeling at her prayer desk. Julius Held has argued that this arrangement places emphasis on the Christ Child as the object of the Magi's adoration, and positions Mary as a symbol of the Church itself.⁴

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The present sketch is closely related to the central panel of Rubens's triptych in the St. Janskerk in Mechelen, which was commissioned in December 1616 and completed in 1619. The Mechelen *Adoration* is the first of many compositions devoted to this theme for which Rubens employed a vertical format. In the triptych, the Virgin wears a white mantle over a blue gown with scarlet sleeves; a close variant of this attire may be seen in the present sketch. Moreover, in both images the Christ Child rests on a similar Roman sarcophagus, while a kneeling, bearded magus in a rich robe of gold brocade presents him with a golden coin-filled vessel.

Comparison with the finished altarpiece in the Louvre provides further insight into Rubens's artistic process. The painter used oil sketches such as the present example to formulate his composition and created additional chalk studies to refine figural details. While the overall pictorial structure of the Louvre altarpiece and its corresponding oil sketch is the same, close examination reveals several differences. The most dramatic change occurs in the figure of the Virgin. In the sketch, Mary's face is drawn in profile and she appears to rest her knee on a broken column, an allusion to the crumbling institution of pagan idolatry as well as the collapse of the Old Testament order. In the finished painting, the column fragment is in the centre foreground, and the Virgin's leg is straightened to clarify her pose. Perhaps to counteract this loss of movement, Rubens painted her face in a more dynamic three-quarter-profile. Moreover, in the finished version, Rubens chose a different colour scheme for Mary's garments. She now wears a white mantle and blue shawl over a scarlet gown. A similar change in colour may be observed in the kneeling magus's sleeve. In the sketch, Rubens has painted it with a magisterial symphony of blues, scarlets and pinks, but selects a simpler monochromatic white in the altarpiece.

The sketch's style suggests that it was executed toward the end of the second decade of the seventeenth century. The brushwork and handling of the figures recall the sketch of *Christ on the Cross*, of circa 1618 – 1620, which was formerly with Otto Naumann.⁵ If this dating is correct, a ten-year gap presents itself between the creation of the present panel and the execution of the Louvre altarpiece. For the Cloister of the Annunciation project of the 1620s, did Rubens return to an older, unused composition from the late 1610s? It is tempting to

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hypothesize that Pieter Peck may have discussed the possibility of a future commission of an *Adoration of the Magi* altarpiece with Rubens during one of their several meetings, some years before Barbara-Maria Boonen officially contracted the artist to paint it. If this was the case, then Rubens might have been working on this composition over the course of many years.

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Figure 1. Peter Paul Rubens, *The Adoration of the Magi*, c. 1626 – 1627.
Louvre Museum, Paris

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Footnotes

¹ See J. Foucard, *Catalogue des peintures flamandes et hollandaises*, Paris 2009, p. 223, no. 1762.

² See H. Vlieghe, *Rubens Portraits of Identified Sitters Painted in Antwerp*, New York 1987, pp. 144-145, no. 128, fig. 160.

³ See M. Jaffé, *Rubens: Catalogo completo*, Milan 1989, nos. 21, 96, 98, 476, 428A, 503, 525, 526, 559, 560, 779, 780, 880, 948, 1094.

⁴ J. Held, *Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: A Critical Catalogue*, Princeton 1980, I, pp. 451, 456.

⁵ See P. Sutton, M. Wieseman and N. van Hout, *Drawn by the Brush: Oil Sketches by Peter Paul Rubens*, exh. cat., New Haven and London 2004, no. 8.