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Sir Peter Paul Rubens,
The Adoration of the Magi

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SIR PETER PAUL RUBENS

(Siegen, Westphalia 1577-1640 Antwerp)

THE ADORATION OF THE MAGI

Oil on oakwood 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, London, Christie's, 9 July 2014, lot 163, where acquired by the present owner.

Literature

H. Devisscher and H. Vlieghe, *Corpus Rubenianum. Ludwig Burchard. Part 5, The life of Christ before the passion*, vol. 1, London 2014, p. 225, no. 44a.

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A powerful compositional study executed with the bold confidence and refined brushwork that defines Sir Peter Paul Rubens' painting on this scale, the present panel relates to a large canvas painted by the master circa 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.

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

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.

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.

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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 king'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.

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

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