

68 The Ascent to Calvary
Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and studio



cat. 68

Oil on canvas, 569 × 355 cm

Brussels, RMFAB, inv. 163

PROV. : Affligem, benedictine abbey; Paris, Musée Central, 1794;

restored by the French government in 1815.

BIBL. : Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, no. 19; Ost 2000; Van Kalck 2003^[4], I, p. 120; cat. exh. Wien 2004,

p. 134; cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati 2004-2005, sub no. 29.



FIG. 1: JACOPO TINTORETTO,
The Ascent to Calvary,
Venice Scuola di San Rocco



FIG. 2: MASTER OF THE LIFE OF ST. JOSEPH,
The Bearing of the Cross, left wing of the
altarpiece with *The Seven Sorrows of the
Virgin*, Brussels, RMFAB

After Pontius Pilate had condemned Him to death by crucifixion, Christ carried His cross to the summit of Mt. Golgotha. Simon of Cyrene rushed to help Him bear the weight of the cross.* Using her veil, Veronica wiped the sweat from His brow, which left behind an imprint of His face, the *Vera icon*. This gesture underscores the importance of the image in devotion and Counter-Reformation Catholic doctrine. Christ looks at the viewer, giving the altarpiece considerable pathos and devotional impact: it incites the viewer to identify with His suffering. At the front of the procession, the good and bad thieves, depicted in contorted poses, are led to their execution by two helmeted Roman soldiers. The helmet of the soldier on the right is based on a model from Rubens' own collection, then considered to be an ancient Roman exemplar.¹ Threatening clouds overshadow the event. The painting as a whole exhibits an uninterrupted upward thrust.² The composition's intersecting diagonals, the striped appearance of the clouds and figures that contrast with the earthy tones of the ground were inspired by Tintoretto's monumental *Ascent to Calvary*, which Rubens must have seen in Venice (Scuola di San Rocco, fig. 1).³ Rubens cites Tintoretto's composition literally, both in the Affligem altarpiece and the preparatory sketches, by including a pink banner fluttering in the wind.

The figure of Christ, by contrast, is more in line with northern tradition and departs from the athletic, muscular, triumphant Christs of Rubens' earlier altarpieces. Perhaps this rather archaic Christ is a reference to the earlier retable that Rubens' painting was meant to replace. The *Ascent to Calvary* was destined for the main altar of the no longer extant Church of Saints Peter and Paul, until then adorned by a late 15th-century retable depicting the *Seven Sorrows of the Virgin* by the Master of the Life of Joseph (КМСКВ, fig. 2).⁴ Rubens was given the commission in November 1634 by Jacob Boonen, archbishop of Mechelen and abbot of the Benedictine abbey in Affligem. The abbey was one of the largest, wealthiest and most splendid in the Netherlands. Around the same time, at the request of Benedictus van Haeften, provost of the abbey, Rubens made a frontispiece for the *Regia via Crucis*, the way of the cross, which was central to the mystical experience of the Passion.⁵ The altarpiece was only installed in the abbey on April 8, 1637; the delay was probably caused by tensions within the abbey. Rubens received 1,600 guilders for the painting and an additional 50 guilders for the assistants who were to place it on the altar. The monumental altar itself, designed by Jacques Francart and built by Jan du Can, who added four Solomonian columns, cost nearly 3,000 guilders – a sign that the Benedictine order had considerable funds at its disposal.⁶

The support on which the altarpiece is painted consists of a single piece of twill-weave canvas (herringbone weave). This type of canvas is extremely sturdy and highly suited to monumental formats.⁷ In all probability, Rubens relied on the assistance of several helpers in order to sketch the composition and paint on the gray *imprimatura*. The initial layout in brown and black (dead coloring) is executed in broad strokes (fig. 3). In some places, where little color is used, it is visible to the naked eye (fig. 4).⁸ The position, gestures and contours of the figures were altered several times in the course of the painting's execution. The Roman soldiers in the upper register are painted with coarse brushstrokes, without modeled transitions, perhaps in order to emphasize their angry determination. Saint John the Evangelist and Mary,

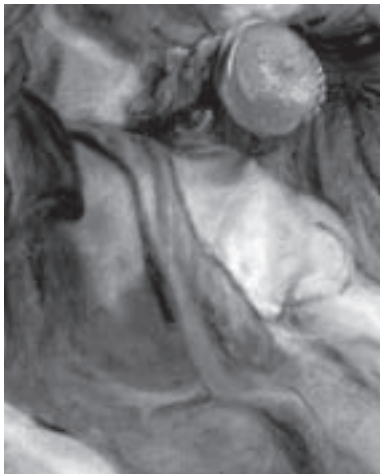


FIG. 3 : PETER PAUL RUBENS AND STUDIO, *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), detail of infrared photograph showing the initial layout

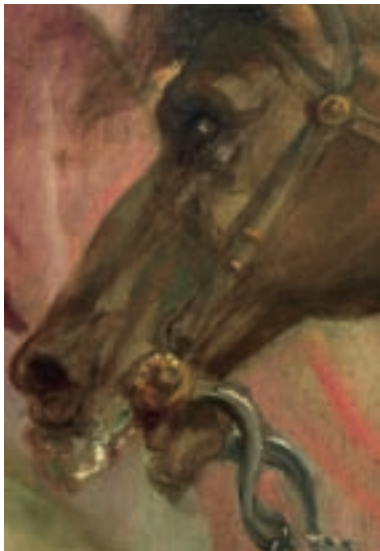


FIG. 4: PETER PAUL RUBENS AND STUDIO, *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), detail

on the left, and a woman on the right remain in an intermediate stage of painting in order to suggest their physical distance. The women of Jerusalem (fig. 5) were probably by Jan van den Hoecke (fig. 6), who worked as Rubens' assistant on various major projects in the 1630s, including the ceiling decorations for the palace at Banqueting Hall (cats 85–88).⁹ Rubens himself was active in several areas of the painting but concentrated on the figures of Christ and St. Veronica, the central players in the narrative. Saint Veronica (fig. 7) is distinguished from other women by virtue of her luminous skin, the black accents around her eyes and the nuanced colors of her clothing. In the course of painting, the artist changed the position of the veil: he exposed Veronica's hands in order to emphasize her gesture as she wipes the sweat from Christ's brow. He also removed the rather anecdotal figure of a child clinging to Veronica's gown, still visible in the sketch, thereby lending her figure greater monumentality. In a final phase, Rubens retouched various figures (including the figures painted by Van den Hoecke, fig. 5). He adjusted their gestures and covered the drapery and sky with a hazy veil of light, and finely shaded colors. The manner in which he emphasized the contraction of Simon of Cyrene's hand with a pair of black lines is nothing short of astonishing (fig. 8).

Phalesius' chronicle *Monasterii SS. Petri et Pauli Affligemiensis Chronicum* of 1637 reports that Rubens received a panel in 1634 so that he might work *a meliori forma*.¹⁰ This sentence has given rise to divergent interpretations which have some bearing on the (supposed) preliminary studies. According to Rooses, Bruyn, Liess and Judson, the passage refers to an improved composition that followed on a rejected original.¹¹ Haverkamp Begemann has proposed that it concerns a format better suited to the task at hand.¹² Held and Heinen are of the opinion that it refers to the earlier altarpiece by the Master of the Life of Joseph.¹³

The Affligem altarpiece is the last *Ascent to Calvary* that Rubens painted and is based on a number of earlier *modelli*, sketches and ideas; it also shows similarities to earlier versions of the same subject. A great deal of discussion surrounds the place of the many preliminary studies in the creative process. It is possible that a number of these *modelli* or studies are actually related to other paintings or prints.

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* See footnotes on p. 208



FIG. 5: PETER PAUL RUBENS AND STUDIO, *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), detail



FIG. 6: JAN VAN DEN HOECKE, *The Meeting of Jacob and Esau*, Bruges, Stedelijke Musea



FIG. 7: PETER PAUL RUBENS AND STUDIO, *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), detail

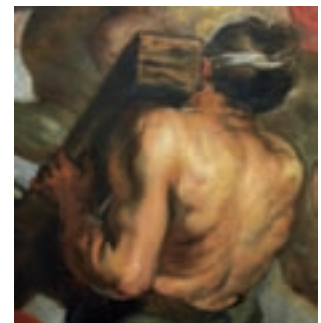


FIG. 8: PETER PAUL RUBENS AND STUDIO, *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), detail

69 The Ascent to Calvary
Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and studio

Oil on panel, 74 × 55 cm
Maastricht, Bonnefantenmuseum,
inv. 5358, on long-term loan from
the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam
PROV. : See Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, p. 86;
purchased by the museum from the
Van Heteren-Gevers collection in 1809.
BIBL. : Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, no. 19c;
cat. exh. Wien 2004, p. 496; cat. exh.
Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati
2004-2005, sub no. 29.



cat. 69

In comparison to the completed altarpiece, the colorful, elaborate sketch in the Rijksmuseum has a broader format and a more horizontal composition.¹⁴ Nearly all the elements of the large altarpiece are present, but the composition lacks order and structure, primarily because there are so many bystanders. The heavy, rather inexpressive, execution of the figures in the background suggests the contribution of an assistant who was perhaps assigned the task of finishing the sketch begun by the master.

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70 The Ascent to Calvary
Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) and studio

Oil on panel with underdrawing
in black chalk, 104.5 × 74.2 cm
Copenhagen, Statens Museum
for Kunst, inv. 1856

PROV. : See Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI,
no. 19d; purchased by the museum
from the art dealer J. Delfordt in
Brussels in 1905.

BIBL. : Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, no.
19d; cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/
Cincinnati 2004–2005, sub no. 29.



cat. 70

The large sketch in Copenhagen is entirely by Rubens' own hand, and in its verticality already shows many similarities to the finished altarpiece.¹⁴ Opinions concerning the place of this sketch in the process of the altar's creation are divided. Held believes that it was an initial concept for a new painting, or an unfinished painting meant to stand alone.¹⁵ On account of its vertical format, Judson, followed by Sutton, considers it Rubens' answer to the refusal of the *modelli* in Brussels and Amsterdam. Haverkamp Begemann is of the opinion that the model only served to emphasize changes in the composition, which were caused by the change in format, so that the details need not be repeated.¹⁶

Technical examination of this sketch during restoration confirms that it indeed comes after the Amsterdam panel in the preparatory process of the altar's creation (cat. 69).¹⁷ Various details (Christ's bare right foot, the bearded profile of the man carrying the cross) in the Amsterdam sketch were reused by Rubens in the underdrawing of the Copenhagen sketch. The master then changed them in the next stage of the process, the actual execution of the painting. He made the scene lighter and more monumental and removed several of the bystanders. The panel Rubens used for the sketch in Copenhagen could well be the one he received from his patron in 1634 in order to paint a *modello* that better corresponded to the elongated format of the planned altarpiece. This panel, which has the standard dimensions of the '26 stuyvermaet', may already have been prepared with a ground layer when it was purchased.¹⁸ Rubens regularly used panels of this size to paint sketches.¹⁹

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- 1 The helmet appears to be a 16th-century exemplar. See cat. exh. New York 1998-1999, p. 152-154, no. 28; Van der Meulen/Balis, CRLB 1994-1995, XXIII, I, p. 125-126; cat. exh. Antwerpen 2004, sub no. 78, p. 296.
- 2 Liess 1977, p. 430.
- 3 Jaffé 1977, p. 36. On the influence of Tintoretto, see Janson 1938 and the introduction by H. Dubois in this catalogue.
- 4 Heinen 1993, p. 138-139; Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, p. 80. On the late 15th-century retable, see Syfer-d'Olene/Slachmuylders/Dubois/Fransen/Peters 2006, p. 26-65.
- 5 Van Roy 1950, p. 151-156; cat. exh. Williamstown 1977, no. 21; Judson/Van de Velde, CRLB 1978, XXI, I, p. 294-296, no. 71. Engraved by Cornelis Galle and published in Antwerp.
- 6 Verleyen 1973, p. 12; Judson, CRLB, 2000, VI, p. 80.
- 7 The structure is very similar to that of the canvases in the series dedicated to the lives of Henry IV of France and of Marie de' Medici, which are also made from a single piece of cloth and are extremely large (Altamura 2001, p. 49-50). As Jost 1964, p. 178-179, suggests, the painter probably used a canvas for this altarpiece that he purchased when he was working on the Henry IV series.
- 8 See the introductory text by H. Dubois in this catalogue.
- 9 Martin, CRLB 2005, xv, p. 76, *passim*. With a word of thanks to Bert Schepers.
- 10 Heinen 1993, Anhang II, p. 162: 'Hoc quoque Anno Petrus Paulus Rubens hic praesens cum Illustrissimo Domino Archiepiscopo et per Illustri Domino praeside Supremo Rose, suscepit tabulam a se meliori formâ delineandam.'
- 11 Rubens/Rooses/Ruelens 1887-1909, II, p. 64; Bruyn 1959, p. 6; Liess 1977, p. 429-447; Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, p. 87-88. Van Puyvelde in cat. exh. Brussels 1965, p. 178, interprets the sentence as indicating that Rubens will take great pains with the work.
- 12 According to Koester 2000, p. 197 and Held 1980, I, no. 348, this panel could also represent the conceptual stage of a new painting.
- 13 Held 1980, I, p. 472-473, 479; Heinen, 1993, p. 137-138.
- 14 According to Gregory Martin, who studied the painting out of the frame, the panel has retained its original format.
- 15 Held 1980, I, p. 478-479.
- 16 Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, p. 87-88; cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati 2004-2005, p. 212; Haverkamp-Begemann 1967, p. 107.
- 17 A sincere word of thanks is owed to the Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, and in particular to Johanneke Verhave, who generously shared her conclusions regarding the technique and function of the work.
- 18 Bruyn 1979, p. 107; Wadum 1998^[1], p. 165.
- 19 See also the introduction 'Pompa introitus' in this catalogue and the *Coronation and Assumption of the Virgin* in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg (106 × 78 cm), or the *Lion Hunt* in de National Gallery in London (105.5 × cm 74): Held 1980, I, p. 509-510 and 406-408.

71 The Ascent to Calvary

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Oil on panel, 59.5 × 45.7 cm

Berkeley, University of California, Berkeley Art Museum, inv. 1966.16

PROV. : See Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, p. 77, cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati 2004-2005, p. 208; purchased by the museum from the Osbourne Gallery, New York, in 1996.

EXH. : Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati 2004-2005, no. 29.

BIBL. : Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, p. 77-79, no. 18; cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati 2004-2005, p. 208-212, no. 29.



cat. 71

72 The Ascent to Calvary

Paulus Pontius (1603–1658)

Print, 650 × 485 mm
Antwerp, Museum Plantin-Moretus/
Prentenkabinet, inv. RH-P 512
BIBL.: Judson, CRLB 2000, VI,
sub no. 18; cat. exh. Wien 2004,
p. 498; cat. exh. Greenwich/Berkeley/
Cincinnati 2004-2005, p. 210-211.



cat. 72

The print of 1632 and the *modello* depict the same moment in the Passion, but they differ in several respects from the finished altarpiece. The women of Jerusalem have been omitted, the background is different and one of the thieves is, like Christ, being pulled by the hair.

The sketch is carefully worked out in a limited palette of gray and brown tones with a few local touches of color. The figures are left-handed, which indicates without doubt that the sketch was intended as a *modello* for an engraving – prints are made from a copper plate on which the engraver has cut a mirror image of the model composition.

The print itself, which dates from 1632, is, according to several authors, the basis of the *modelli* in Copenhagen (cat. 70), Maastricht (cat. 69) and Vienna (cat. 74).¹ According to Held, the print was meant to promote Rubens' interests in Affligem so that he would receive a commission for the main altarpiece.² The sturdy, muscular figure of Simon of Cyrene, already present in the engraving, was systematically reused in the sketches in Maastricht (cat. 69) and Copenhagen (cat. 70), as well as in the final altarpiece (cat. 68).

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¹ Zarnowski 1938; D'Hulst 1968, p. 108.

² Held 1980, I, p. 476.

73 The Ascent to Calvary
Studio of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)?

Oil on panel, 58 × 46.5 cm
Brussels, RMFAB, inv. 5057
PROV.: Acquired by Remy at auction,
Antwerp, 7 June 1774, no. 3;¹
see also Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, no. 19b;
acquired from P. de Boer, Amsterdam,
by the Museum in 1935.
EXH.: Wien 2004, no. 134.
BIBL.: Judson, CRLB 2000, VI, no. 19b;
cat. exh. Wien 2004, no. 134; cat. exh.
Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati
2004-2005, sub no. 29.



cat. 73

In this compact composition crammed with figures, the protagonists seem to be anything but involved in the Passion, among other things because Veronica looks at an executioner instead of Christ, and Christ stares off into space. Moreover, the direction of movement runs from the upper left to the lower right, an exception in the (presumed) series of preparatory studies. Only the group below appears in the finished altarpiece (cat. 68) A number of art historians have considered this *bozzetto* the first tentative design for the monumental altarpiece. However, its state of preservation does not permit the endorsement of this hypothesis. A large part of the sketch has been damaged by an early cleaning, and it has been retouched extensively in the past. The poses of some of the figures and helpers, the twisted, entangled bodies and oversized heads as well as the overall composition raise questions as to Rubens' authorship. Perhaps it was an exercise carried out by a studio assistant.

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¹ Vermeylen 2006, p. 193.

74 The Ascent to Calvary
Studio of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Oil on panel, 64 × 49.5 cm

Vienna, Gemäldegalerie der Akademie
der bildenden Künste, inv. 625

PROV. : See Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI,
sub no. 17; collection of Count Anton
Franz de Paula Lambert-Sprinzenstein
(1740–1822), who donated it to the
Akademie.

EXH. : Wien 2000, no. 17; Wien 2004,
no. 135.

BIBL. : Judson, *CRLB 2000*, VI, sub no. 17;
Trnek/Halbgebauer/Koch 2000, no. 17;
cat. exh. Wien 2004, no. 135; cat. exh.
Greenwich/Berkeley/Cincinnati
2004-2005, sub no. 29.



cat. 74

This composition, in which the artist seems to have felt compelled to pack everything into the picture plane, lacks the depth and momentum that directs the eye in the finished altarpiece. The pyramidal structure makes a superficial impression. This sketch was probably intended for another project. Held is of the opinion that the work was completed by one of Rubens' studio assistants and that it dates to ca. 1614–1616.¹

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¹ Held 1980, I, no. 344.