

118 The Miracles of St. Benedict

Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640)

Oil on canvas, 164 × 262 cm

Brussels, RMFAB, inv. no. 4063

PROV. : See Vlieghe, CRLB 1972-1973, VIII, I, no. 73; collection of King Leopold II, acquired by the Belgian government in 1914.

EXH. : See Vlieghe, CRLB 1972-1973, VIII, I, no. 73; Tokyo/Nagasaki/Osaka 2006-2007, no. 8.

BIBL. : Vlieghe, CRLB 1972-1973, VIII, I, no. 73; Ost 2000, p. 193-197; Van Hout 2000, p. 283-288; Van Hout 2006, p. 154-156.



cat. 118



FIG. 1: Diagram of the composition of the canvas of cat. 118

According to Vlieghe, the subject of this painting is iconographically connected to the Benedictines. He also proceeds from the assumption that the work was made at their request. The painting is at any rate from the Benedictine abbey of Affligem.¹ Ost argues that *The Miracles of St. Benedict* once hung in the choir of this abbey church as a pendant to *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* (London, National Gallery, inv. NG 59). Both pieces would have flanked Rubens' *Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), which occupied the main altar. Although the dimensions of the *Miracles of St. Benedict* roughly correspond to those of the London painting, the figures in the latter are proportionally much larger. This distracting difference in size makes it highly improbable that Rubens created the two pieces as pendants.

From the manner in which the linen support of the *Miracles of St. Benedict* was assembled, it appears that the work was created in various stages (see fig. 1). To the core canvas (A), which measures approximately 157 × 194 cm, Rubens added a small strip on the left (B) with a width of 9 to 11 cm. On the right side, the enlargement was effected with two strips of cloth, each approximately 30 cm and 23-24 cm wide, respectively (C and D-D'). In raking light, it is clear that the weave of the added pieces differs from that of the linen used for the core. Each of the pieces of cloth has been provided with an *imprimatura* layer with a different gray tonality. The type of paint used to fill in the various seams – rather carelessly, it may be added – enables us to reconstruct the history of the canvas's creation.

The original scene depicted on the core canvas (A) was far from complete when it was incorporated into the larger composition. The columned portico in the background and the figures in the foreground were still not completely worked out. Rubens probably began to adapt the core canvas around the same time the support was being enlarged.² The crow flying up to the left of St. Benedict has changed places twice. The artist adjusted the positioning of various figures. In a single movement, he changed the entire sky with the help of blue, white and yellow touches of paint in a nebulous background. This reworking took place rather nonchalantly. Strokes of paint from the sky, for example, overlap the outstretched hand of Saint Benedict which the artist had painted earlier. In the group of invalids in the foreground, we also find a number of unfinished or overpainted areas. Rubens allowed a ghostly figure to dissolve in an area of shadow. Part of the shroud of the resurrected man in the center was brushed over with transparent brown paint. In this way, Rubens suggested a shaded armpit and right side. The shroud initially took up more space and was reduced on several sides with black paint.

The addition of strip B enabled Rubens to portray the white horse – originally crowded into the left corner of the core canvas – in three-quarter profile. The last figures in the procession of Ostrogoths on strip D are still in a very early stage of painting. In an almost calligraphic manner, they were brushed in using pale tints that contrast sharply with the more saturated colors of the core. The face and upraised arm of the figure in the region of the seam between strips C and D was painted by Rubens with a viscous paint. In this way, the artist achieved an impressive chiaroscuro effect.

The Miracles of Saint Benedict is one of the rare dead-colored and unfinished paintings by Rubens. It forms an important source of information concerning the master's painting techniques. Stylistically, Vlieghe situates this work correctly in the early 1630s. However, I consider it possible that Rubens may have reused an earlier painting that was abandoned shortly after it was begun (A). Paintings with similar themes depicting saints and invalids occur earlier in Rubens' oeuvre. Among them there was at least one that was commissioned but never executed on a large format.³

1 In the heavens, Christ is flanked by the patron saints of the abbey, Peter and Paul. Nevertheless, the painting's connection to Affligem remains problematic, because it was apparently never sold during Rubens' lifetime. In 1641, after the artist's death, Helena Fourment gave the painting to Gaspar de Crayer. *The Miracles of St. Benedict* eventually found its way to the abbey of Affligem: in a letter dated October 14, 1777, the provost of the abbey, Beda Regaus, describes the work as 'a sketch'. Six years earlier, J.F.M. Michel also saw the canvas in the abbey which he described as a sketch ('une esquisse').

2 This retouching was definitely carried out by Rubens himself and not by Gaspar De Crayer, as Ost suggests (2000, p. 195).

3 *The Miracles of Saint Francis of Paola*, worked out in a sketch but never actually executed for the church of the Minims in Tours (see Jaffé 1989, nos. 903 and 904), of ca. 1627-1628.

NVH

119 The Miracles of St. Benedict
Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) after Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640)

Oil on canvas, 130 × 194.8 cm

Brussels, RMFAB, inv. 4072

PROV. : Acquired by Théophile Thoré for Emile Pereire at the Delacroix sale, February 1864, no. 162; acquired by Bram at the Pereire sale, 6 March 1872; collection of King Leopold II of Belgium, 1881; acquired by the Belgian government from the heirs of Leopold in 1914.

EXH. : See Johnson 1993, p. 3, no. 163; Tokyo/Nagasaki/Osaka 2006-2007, no. 9.

BIBL. : See Johnson 1993, p. 3, no. 163.

In a simplified version of art history, one has always tried to place the colorist Eugène Delacroix opposite the draftsman Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. Naturally, this opposition reflects only part of the truth. What is certain, however, is that Delacroix's investigation of the effects of color and light lay at the basis of his interest in the Venetian school and Rubens, among others. He expressed his opinion of the Antwerp master repeatedly and copied Rubens' works, which he was able to see in Paris, Brussels and Antwerp. Using these copies, Delacroix tried to plumb the depths of Rubens' warm, transparent colors. He opposed Rubens' 'brilliant colors' to the 'pale colors' of Jacques-Louis David and suggested that the gloss that appeared was caused by the white ground layer of Rubens' panels. During a visit to Belgium in 1850, which included stops in Brussels and Antwerp, he made the following notation in his diary: 'Even on his backgrounds that have been rubbed with a sort of grisaille, he often applies white highlights. The coloring in usually begins with the local application of a very thin intermediary tint. Over this, I believe, he applies the flesh tones and areas of shadow.... It is abundantly clear that he models or surrounds the figure with this local light and shadow before adding more powerful strokes. I believe that his gracious paintings, such as this one *The Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68), and the *St. Benedict*, which resembles it, must have been created in this way.'¹

In all probability, Delacroix copied Rubens' *Miracles of St. Benedict* (cat. 118) in Paris, where the painting was in the possession of a certain Mr. Georges, described as a kind of 'expert'.² Everything seems to indicate that the following passage in a letter from Delacroix to Alexandre Bixio, probably from May 1841, refers to this painting: 'tell him that if he wants to see the Rubens, he must stop some morning at Mr. George's, Rue Traversière-Saint-Honoré, no. 41, with the report that I have sent him, and he will be shown the work. I am obliged to interrupt my work there.'³ This unfinished canvas by Rubens was eminently suited to the study of the master's technique. Delacroix refers to it again in 1847 in connection with the use of white and grisaille: 'The large copy of the *St. Benedict* that I made in such a way has a freshness which is difficult to achieve by other means.'⁴ From this copy, it is possible to read Delacroix' interest in striving for unity in painting through the use of a unique color scheme. The copy is moreover strikingly faithful to the original, right down to the format of the canvas, which is almost identical to that of Rubens. The difference between the original and copy is revealed by the brushwork: Rubens' steadiness contrasts with the more restive touch of Delacroix.

The influence of Rubens' *Miracles of St. Benedict* on Delacroix is more visible in the composition for the *Resurrection of Lazarus* (Öffentliche Kunstsammlung, Basel), with its group of expressively gesticulating figures. Eugène Delacroix also copied the *Ascent to Calvary* (cat. 68) in the Brussels museum. Again, he was primarily attracted by the brilliant colors.

IRS

1 Delacroix/Joubin/Labourdette 1996, 9 July 1850, p. 247.

2 Robaut/Chesneau 1885, p. 197, no. 736. Robaut writes that he knew this from Mr. Tencé, owner of the work by Rubens. He moreover gives a different address for Mr. George [sic] than the one provided by Delacroix in his letter.

3 Delacroix/Joubin 1935-1938, II, p. 77.

4 Delacroix/Joubin/Labourdette 1996, 28 February 1847, p. 136. He is discussing the preparation of the canvas for his *Two Foscari*, Chantilly, Musée Condé.



cat. 119