

bilbao **museoa**

Rubens

Sketches by Rubens at the musée
Bonnat-Helleu in Bayonne

Regarded as the most outstanding painter of the seventeenth century in Europe and one of the most important in the whole of art history, one of the numerous virtues of Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) lies in his mastery of sketches. Rubens' work stood out in this facet, which is so crucial to understanding his creative process, for both his quality and quantity—he created around 500 copies, almost one-third of his total output. His sketches also transformed and outstripped the traditional concept of previous study, which he used as an exclusively paper-based medium.

Rubens received a meticulous, polyglot, classical education which enabled him to feel at home in aristocratic milieus from a young age. During his sojourn in Italy serving as the Duke of Mantua's chamber painter, he became familiar with the works of the Renaissance masters. In Spain, he showed his skill at creating grandiloquent portraits,

and later in Antwerp he addressed religious themes with a splendour that has not yet been matched. His extensive output is due to his prodigious skill as a draughtsman and colourist, with unique expertise in capturing human anatomy and developing the broadest range of themes, and to the collaboration of the countless helpers working in his extensive atelier.

This selection of sketches is a good example of this facet of the Flemish painter that is so important yet so often overlooked by the public. They belong to a very prolific period in which he was serving the Spanish court. Six of them are related to the décor of the Torre de la Parada, and in the mid-eighteenth century they were in Spain thanks to the Duke of the Infantado, along with another 50 or so sketches. They come from this collection and were acquired by the officer and explorer from Bayonne, Victor-Bernard Derrécagaix (1833–1915), when he was travelling through the country. In 1921, his widow formalised their bequest to the Musée Bonnat-Helleu and added another Rubens sketch for one of the tapestries of the Descalzas Reales monastery, which Derrécagaix had also acquired in Spain.



Paulus Pontius (according to Rubens)

Peter Paul Rubens

Etching on paper

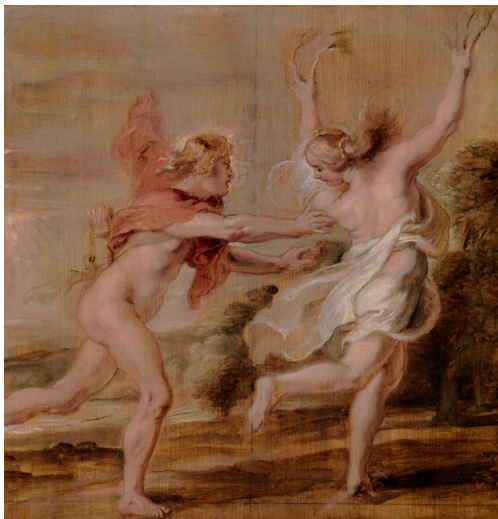
Pontius, one of the most important and prolific engravers in the Flemish Baroque, worked regularly for Van Dyck and Rubens. This print is precisely based on the portrait that the latter made for his Iconography, a series of images of artists that led with this one, the portrait of his master. Pontius himself is included in this series. Van Dyck was able to make the portrait between 1632 and 1635, so Rubens would have been around 50. The legend that appears on the lower edge refers to the title of the Gentleman of the Bedchamber for the King that Philip IV, an avid collector of Rubens' work, gave the painter in 1624.

Private Collection

Torre de la Parada

In 1636, Philip IV and the architect Juan Gómez de Mora set out to enlarge a small fortress that Philip II had built with the architect Luis de Vega on the outskirts of Madrid. The outcome of this remodelling was a small palace turned into a hunting pavilion called Torre de la Parada, and the monarch commissioned several artists to create an ambitious groups of paintings to decorate it. The most important series, which contains 60 works on mythological themes, was commissioned to Rubens that same year by the cardinal-infante Ferdinand of Austria, Philip IV's brother, inspired by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the life of Hercules. The painter divided the series into several sections which did not have a specific programme but were related to each other by the purpose of the space in which they were located: all the paintings depicted hunting and recreational scenes. The compositions and themes were dreamt up by Rubens himself, who painted the sketches in oil on

small oak boards which were later transferred to large canvases by him—he personally took charge of 14 works—and other painters he hired, including Jacob Jordaens and Jan Cossiers. We know that the work was completed by 1638–1639, but the building, along with the majority of paintings, disappeared in a fire during the War of the Spanish Succession in 1714, so Rubens' sketches, which are scattered about different collections, are an exceptional testimony of this project. The six presented in this gallery show vigorous, synthetic execution, largely conditioned by the requirements of the commission, whose deadlines and volume forced the artist to deploy a display of inventiveness that guaranteed the richness and variety of the compositions, as well as their necessary narrative clarity. The clearly defined outlines and the use of very light layers of paint, which often show glimpses of the primer, are examples of the artist's technical prowess.



Apollo and Daphne

c. 1636. Oil on panel

Apollo fell in love with Daphne after he was hit by an arrow shot by Cupid. He pursued her, mad with desire, and almost caught her. The terrified girl implored her father—a river god—to save her, and he turned her into a laurel tree (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, book I). Thereafter, Apollo had to be just by wearing leaves from this tree as a crown.

The vertical line marking the central axis of the composition is similar to many others found in the sketches in this series. Just as he did in the majority of paintings in this series, Rubens outsourced the painting itself to another artist, in this case Theodoor van Thulden (the painting belongs to the Museo del Prado).

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Cupid and Psyche

c. 1636. Oil on panel

The famous story of Cupid and Psyche is part of the *Metamorphoses* by the second-century writer and philosopher Apuleius (also known as *The Golden Ass*). Psyche stopped loving Cupid when she realised that he had been spying on her—she was awoken by a drop of hot oil that dripped from his candle. Rubens depicts the moment just before this incident, when the girl was still wallowing in the peerless beauty of the god of love and desire. Despite the tricks designed by the jealous Venus, the two lovers reunited.

By wisely alternating zones that are more or less opaque in the layer of brown paint surrounding the figures, Rubens contributes to the sense of spatial depth.

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Scylla and Glaucus

c. 1636. Oil on panel

The story of the sea god Glaucus and his desire for Scylla is recounted in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book XIV), just like the majority of myths that Rubens painted for Torre de la Parada. Seeking the woman's love, Glaucus enlisted the help of the goddess Circe, who made his pain eternal because she was in love with him.

On the right, several dogs are attacking Scylla, who has her arms raised, just before she is turned into another animal. Glaucus is watching the scene, horrified at the loss of the woman he had been trying to seduce.

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Hercules Discovering Purple

c. 1636. Oil on panel

The story is told by the Greek Julius Pollux in his *Onomasticon* (book I), written in the second century. While walking with his owner along a beach in Tyre, Hercules' dog bit a mollusc shell and stained his lips purple. This is how the most valuable dye in the ancient world, especially during the Roman period, was discovered. The city of Tyre, currently in Lebanon, is depicted in the background. The purple from this source was particularly prized.

The paint in whitish and earthen tones is thicker on the left side of the scene, which Rubens outlined with a black line drawn with pencil.

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Pan and Syrinx

c. 1636. Oil on panel

The hypersexual god of Arcadia, Pan, combines the features of a human and a goat. In this scene, inspired by the verses in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (book I), he libidiously and violently approaches the nymph Syrinx, who flees from him and plunges into the Ladon River. Syrinx implores the river nymphs to turn into cattail reeds to save her, which they did. Pan made his syrinx, or flute, from these reeds.

The numerous vertical lines underlying the entire composition (they are particularly visible in the upper left-hand corner) are the marks left by a thick brush used to give the board a tone before painting the scene. Rubens left this type of line visible in many of his sketches.

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Selene (or Diana) and Endymion

c. 1636. Oil on panel

The Greek Moon goddess Selene's (sometimes identified with the goddess Diana) love of Endymion made Zeus jealous. When the goddess asked him to make the handsome man eternally young, Zeus instead made him fall into eternal slumber. The story is recounted by the Archaic poet Sappho, as well as other sources. Sappho's work often inverts the male and female roles, as the goddesses seek to seduce or violate different men.

Rubens enlivened the surface of the board with the vigorous movement of his paintbrush. The goddess's gesture makes her pain credible. On the upper right-hand part, we can see the marks of a stick that the painter used to scratch the still-wet paint on the area where he dragged it.

Bayonne, musée Bonnat-Helleu



Paulus Pontius (according to Rubens)

Philip IV

Enching on paper

Philip IV commissioned the architect Juan Gómez de Mora to reform the residence—actually a hunting pavilion—known as Torre de la Parada, which had been built on a commission from Philip II near El Pardo palace. During the War of the Spanish Succession, in 1710, a fire destroyed the building and almost all the paintings that decorated it. We know about these works, which were by such prominent artists as Vicente Carducho and Velázquez, thanks to the inventory drawn up upon the death of Charles II in 1700. The decorative theme commissioned to Rubens consisted in 60 paintings on mythological themes, 14 of which he made himself, whose original sketches served as a guide for the artists who executed the others.

Private Collection

Descalzas Reales

Throughout its history, the Descalzas Reales monastery in Madrid has been the residence of different royal and aristocratic ladies whose donations created an important art collection. One example is the infanta Isabel Clara Eugenia, the daughter of Philip II and the governor of the Netherlands, who in 1625 commissioned Rubens the sketches to make 20 tapestries in Brussels on the theme of the triumph of the Eucharist as the main dogma of Catholicism to decorate the monastery. Based on these sketches, which are among the best in the painter's oeuvre, his helpers made the large cartoon, which was an intermediate step. The facture of these *modelli*, made in oil on wooden boards, is more elaborate and larger in size than in the series in Torre de la Parada. *The Prophet Elijah Receiving Bread and Water from an Angel*, which is displayed in this gallery, clearly shows qualities inherent to this key figure in the Baroque, such as his loose, self-assured brushstrokes and the transparency of the colour.



The Prophet Elijah Receiving Bread and Water from an Angel

1625-1626. Oil on panel

Rubens painted this sketch in preparation for one of the four series of tapestries that he designed throughout his lifetime, the Eucharist series. The commission came from Isabel Clara Eugenia, for whom Rubens worked as a court painter and diplomat. The theme of the series is the glorification of the mystery of the Eucharist, expressed here by a scene from the Old Testament in which the angel provides food and drink to the prophet Elijah. Several religious texts (including Saint Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*) interpreted this biblical story as a foreshadowing of the Eucharist.

Rubens' helpers used this sketch to make a large painting (cartoon) on which the tapestry weavers based their work. The scene was envisioned as a tapestry hanging from columns, trompe l'oeil style. The columns were repainted by an artist after Rubens, perhaps because he barely outlined them.



Paulus Pontius (according to Rubens)

Isabel Clara Eugenia Wearing a Habit of the Poor Clares

Etching on paper

Upon the death of her mother, Isabel of Valois, in 1568, Isabel Clara Eugenia and her sister Catalina Micaela were left under the guardianship of their aunt Joanna of Austria in the Descalzas Reales monastery of Madrid, where they lived until 1598. In 1625, Isabel Clara Eugenia commissioned Rubens to make the 20 sketches with eucharistic themes which were later transferred to tapestries to decorate the monastery, where she was planning to retreat after the period when she served as the governor of the Netherlands. This series, painted on wooden board and considered the best of the artist's oeuvre, includes *The Prophet Elijah Receiving Bread and Water from an Angel*, which was acquired by Victor-Bernard Derrécagaix and bequeathed to the Musée Bonnat-Helleu. This print is based on the portrait that Rubens made of Isabel Clara Eugenia of Hapsburg in 1625, conserved today at the Norton Simon Museum in Pasadena (United States).

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