



A Saint returns: “Gregorius of Nazianzus” by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens

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Press kit



Friedenstein
Stiftung
Gotha



Press release of 26 June 2024

“Saint Gregory of Nazianzus” by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens returns to the Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha.

A linchpin of the art collection is coming home to Friedenstein: the oil sketch “Saint Gregory of Nazianzus” by the Flemish painter Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Thanks to generous support from the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung (EvSK) it returns now to its original place at the Ducal Museum in Gotha.

Rubens painted this study himself in 1621. It is one of the Gotha series consisting of five sketches in oil painted by the artist in the years around 1620 as he prepared to decorate the Jesuit Church of St Charles Borromeo in Antwerp. The sketches are all the more precious because the ceilings with the painted canvases were destroyed in a fire. This series was regarded as one of the outstanding jewels of art history in the collection at Gotha but it was scattered to the winds during the hostilities of the Second World War. Only two of the sketches were on the Friedenstein until recently.

In the words of its director Tobias Pfeifer-Helke, *“Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha aims to restore the historical integrity of the collection, especially with regard to this highlight, the set of five sketches by Rubens. They will be made accessible to the public once again in their historical context. I am delighted, therefore, that with ‘Saint Gregory of Nazanzus’ one of the lost works has found its way back to Friedenstein. I am most grateful to the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung for their generous support and I look forward to our constructive collaboration with all concerned.”*

The return

The return is the result of an intense process framed by constructive cooperation between two arts institutions serving the public (Buffalo AKG Art Museum in the United States and Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha), by the mediation and responsible spirit of the auction house Christie’s and by the commitment of EvSK as a foundation in support of the arts.

“Schloss Friedenstein with its major collections has suffered more than most German arts institutions from embezzlement, war-time loss and relocations to Russia. The EvSK has, for many years now, been a dependable partner in restitutions of outstanding art and in the course of this work it has invested in a legal analysis of the various circumstances of loss and their documentation. The recovery of the Rubens sketch is doubtless a prelude to further significant restitutions for which, depending on the history of the loss, no market price is paid and fair compensation is sought between the parties instead. Warm thanks to all those involved for prioritising the historical evolution of the collection in Gotha over commercial gain,” applauds Dr Martin Hoernes, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung.



The process began in 2020 when the Buffalo AKG Art Museum (formerly the Albright-Knox Art Gallery) submitted the sketch to Christie's and asked them to organise the sale of the oil sketch "Saint Gregory of Nazianzus" by Rubens in keeping with the guidelines issued by the Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) and the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

Professor Dirk Boll, Christie's, Deputy Chairman, 20th and 21st Century Art, observes: *"Christie's had already returned a work of Gotha provenance in 2006, and so there is a sensitivity in our house for the collection's history. Through our exercise of due diligence and our understanding that art market systems share in the regulatory responsibility, we were pleased to assist the museum in the United States in their decision not to offer the work on the open market and rather to directly sell it to Gotha."*

Christie's conducted the negotiations on behalf of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum with Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, which had listed the work on the Lost Art database in 2001. The foundation in Gotha was keen from the outset to achieve an amicable agreement, believing that, while the museum had acquired the work in good faith in 1952, the true details of ownership had not been public knowledge at the time.

"As one of the world's first museums of modern and contemporary art, the mandate of the Buffalo AKG Art Museum since its founding in 1862 has been to collect and exhibit the art of the present moment," says Janne Sirén, Peggy Pierce Elfvin Director of the Buffalo AKG. *"The early seventeenth-century oil study by Rubens falls well outside the mission of this museum, and as a result the Board of Directors elected to transfer the work to a more suitable institution. We are grateful to Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, the Ernst von Siemens Kunststiftung, and Christie's for facilitating this sale, which is a demonstration of the transformative power of transatlantic communication and collaboration."*

The turbulent history of the oil sketches

The modelli of "Saint Athanasius" and "Saint Basil" returned to Friedenstein in 1958. After the Red Army arrived, they had been taken to the Soviet Union but were later returned. A different fate met the current homecomer and the two sketches by Rubens still missing from the collection. They were removed from Friedenstein in 1945 and, with the argument that they should be stored beyond the reach of the Red Army, transferred to Coburg at the end of the war. By this time the works had long since ceased to be the property of the dukes of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha, whose family sold them to buyers in the United States soon after the war. Instead they belonged to an independent foundation set up with a mission to serve public purposes in art and science under the name "Herzog von Sachsen-Coburg und Gotha'sche Stiftung für Kunst und Wissenschaft". In 1952 the sketch of St Gregory was sold by the gallery E. & A. Silberman in New York to the Albright Art Gallery, the predecessor of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery from which the Buffalo AKG Art Museum later emerged.

The absence of the other three modelli by Rubens is currently marked by black-and-white reproductions hanging alongside the original sketches of "Saint Athanasius" and "Saint Basil" in the Dutch and Flemish Room at the Ducal Museum in Gotha. One of these vacant spots will be filled by the colourful original when "Saint Gregory of Nazanzius" returns home.



The other Rubens sketches still missing from Gotha are listed as wartime losses on the Lost Art database maintained by the German Lost Art Foundation.

“The Prophet Elijah” is assumed to have been in the possession of Curtius O. Baer from 1952. It was last verifiably held in the collection of George M. Baer († 2009) of Atlanta, Georgia. By 1997 at the latest, the oil sketch was recorded as on loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.. It is unclear, however, whether it is still there. “Saint Augustine” is now in the Bührlé Collection in Switzerland and on display at Kunsthaus Zürich. Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha is engaged in constructive talks with the Bührlé Collection aimed at bringing the work to Gotha as a temporary loan so that the entire series of sketches by Rubens can be honoured in an exhibition.

Further details, press material and photographs

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Background

Oil sketches for the Jesuit Church at Antwerp



Antoon Gheringh
Interior of the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, 1665
Oil on canvas, 75.6 x 95.5 cm
Antwerp, The Phoebus Foundation
© The Phoebus Foundation

The five oil studies from Gotha belong to a series of 22 surviving works made by Rubens as designs for paintings destined for the Jesuit Church at Antwerp. Those paintings once adorned the ceilings over the galleries and side aisles in the church. It was Rubens' first major commission for a public building, a key milestone in his career.

The church itself is a masterpiece of sacred baroque architecture. It was built for the Jesuit Order in the years 1614 to 1621 to plans produced by the Jesuits François d'Aguilon and Pieter Huysens and by Peter Paul Rubens. The paintings themselves were completed by early 1621.

The ceiling imagery alternated between biblical scenes, female saints and Fathers of the Church and was intended to visualise the Jesuit claim to represent true Catholic teachings.



Although Rubens painted the sketches himself, well-known members of his atelier implemented the works for the ceilings, which were destroyed in a fire in the 18th century. The modelli demonstrate the artistic virtuosity of the Flemish master and are impressive examples of the spontaneous brushwork yet skilful shaping that distinguishes oil sketches in his own hand.

The original 39 paintings were completely destroyed when lightning struck the church on 18 July 1718, setting fire to the roof. Large sections of the church collapsed and were reduced to ashes within hours. The surviving oil sketches of 1620 are hence primary records of inestimable value and a priceless testimony to the total artwork that is no longer extant.

*Further details in the German press section at www.friedensteine.de
(extract from the catalogue of Dutch and Flemish paintings in the collection)*



Gotha's five oil sketches: How they came into the Gotha collection



The Fanlight Room in the Ducal Museum before 1945

© Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha

In the early 18th century, the ducal chamber of curiosities at Schloss Friedenstein already held one sketch painted in oils by Rubens as he prepared to decorate the Jesuit Church. The “Elijah” had been purchased by Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732). In 1802 Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) then bought the oil sketches of St Athanasius and St Basil, along with the modelli of St Gregory of Nazianzus and St Augustine, from the Brussels art dealer François Xavier de Burtin.

De Burtin first mentions these works in a letter to the duke dated 1 November 1801:

“If my efforts are successful I soon expect to have the pleasure of offering Your Highness four genuine original paintings by the great Rubens [worth] 100 Louis d’or apiece between brothers; but I hope to arrange matters so that the four together will not cost you more than 100 Louis d’or de France.”

In a second letter from Brussels on 20 February 1802, De Burtin refers to the pictures again:

“During a rather stubborn illness which I recently endured I received a letter from Baron von Zach informing me that Your Highness wishes me to send you the description of four interesting paintings by Rubens which I have acquired with the intention of offering them to you. [...] These 4 paintings, painted on oakwood, 21 Saxon inches high and 273/8 inches wide, are very well preserved and set in quite splendid frames carved in oak and completely gilded, of which each one cost at least 5 Louis d’or. They were painted entirely by the great Rubens himself to serve as models for his pupils and, under his supervision, they were implemented at scale in the lower



gallery of the famous Jesuit Church at Antwerp, which, like its tower, was built and decorated entirely to drawings by that great man in the years 1614 to 1621. [...] Each painting depicts one of the 4 Patres of the Church: Augustine, Gregory of Nazianz, Basil and Athanasius. [...] These 4 paintings have been widely reputed for many years, not only for their unquestionable origination by Rubens, but also because they belong to that small number of his works made entirely by his own hand without any contribution from his skilful pupils. [...] Although these 4 jewels of art could be valued without exaggeration at 500 Louis d'or – a very moderate sum in comparison to the customary prices for paintings by this master, of which barely anything remains since the revolution in this country – and although I was asked to pay 180 Louis d'or for them, very fortunate circumstances allowed me to acquire them so cheaply, partly for money and partly for an advantageous exchange, that they have in fact altogether only cost me the modest price of 96 [...] French Louis d'or. In view of the great good fortune I have had, I believe I can hand them over to Your Highness for 110 Louis d'or, less the seven Louis which your Highness requested of me as a discount on my next consignment, and so I would receive 103 Louis. [...] For the rest, I take the liberty of hoping that your Highness will be eternally grateful for the magnificent purchase which I have made so inexpensive and which will be the pearl of his collection! And I guarantee the authenticity of these four Rubens paintings by promising to take them back should anyone during my lifetime convince me of my error and to pay Your Highness twice the amount that I received!"

After 1918, following the abdication of the ducal house, the oil sketches by Rubens had been in the possession of an independent art foundation in Gotha entrusted with preserving the artworks and making them accessible to the general public in Gotha.



“Saint Gregory of Nazianzus”
(the homecomer)



Peter Paul Rubens
“Saint Gregory of Nazianzus”, 1621
Oil on wood (oak), 48 x 62 cm
© Christie's Images 2024

Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels | Removed to Coburg in March 1945 | E. & A. Silberman Galleries, New York | Albright Knox Art Gallery, USA | Returned in 2024

The saint, standing on a cloud in white bishop's garb, leans back as he strikes the winged devil in the face with the tip of his crozier, causing sparks to fly and the demon, who has one foot on the clouds, to tumble backwards. An angel floating above carries a banderol with the name.

The brandmarks verso, rarely preserved, illustrate the practice of the painters guild in Antwerp of marking wooden panels with their seal of quality prior to sale. In addition to the castle and two hands, the oil sketch of St Gregory of Nazianzus was stamped on the back with the ligatured monogram “LS” used by the panel maker Lambrecht Steens (I) of Antwerp.



“Saint Athanasius Overcoming Arius”

(returned to Gotha in 1958)



Peter Paul Rubens
“Saint Athanasius Overcoming Arius”, 1620
Oil on wood (oak), 49.6 x 64.4 cm
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. 709
© Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, Foto: Thomas Fuchs

Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels |1946–1958 Moscow |1958 Restitution

Rubens depicts the saint as the physically superior victor over the heretic Arius. Athanasius wears a white alb tied at the waist with a cord, a yellow pallium, a dark, tunic-like habit and a wide brown cape. He rests his foot triumphantly on the fallen Arius, aiming the tip of his episcopal staff at the heretic's chest like a weapon. The naked angel hovering above displays a billowing banderol with the word “ATHANAS”.

The wooden panel consists of two boards glued together horizontally. Two hands and a castle – the brandmarks of the Guild of St Luke in Antwerp – have been burnt into the wood verso. Alongside these is the panel maker's monogram, the landmark “LS”. Dendrochronological examination indicates that the wood was stored for eleven years before Rubens used it as a support for his painting.

*Further details in the German press section at www.friedensteine.de
(extract from the catalogue of Dutch and Flemish paintings in the collection)*



“Saint Basil”

(returned to Gotha in 1958)



Peter Paul Rubens
“Saint Basil”, 1620
Oil on wood (oak), 49.5 x 64.4 cm
Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, inv. 710
© Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, Foto: Thomas Fuchs

Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels |1946–1958 Moscow |1958 Restitution

Like Athanasius, the heavily foreshortened Basil is depicted from a worm’s eye perspective. He is shown as an ascetic monk in religious ecstasy. Rubens has therefore clothed him as a monk and not as a bishop. He wears a simple brown tunic tied around the waist under a wide black coat with a hood. He is half-kneeling on a cloud and looking with outstretched arms towards the sky. Three books lie before him, two of them open. The lowest of them is only intimated and integrated into the cloud formation. A spiralling column wends towards Heaven on the left. At the top a naked angel flies through the air with a billowing cloth. Rubens has marked “S. Basilius” on the edge of the painting.

The support consists of two boards glued together horizontally. It lost thickness in the past when a thin cradle was applied to the back. As a result no brandmarks, stamps or etched symbols have been preserved.

Further details in the German press section at www.friedensteine.de/presse
(extract from the catalogue of Dutch and Flemish paintings in the collection)



“Saint Augustine”

(lost)



Peter Paul Rubens

“Saint Augustine”, 1620

Oil on wood (oak), 48 x 62 cm

© Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, Fotoarchiv

This oil sketch is listed as lost on the Lost Art database.

Acquired in 1802 under Duke Ernst II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1745–1804) from art dealer François Xavier de Burtin of Brussels | Removed to Coburg in March 1945 | E. & A. Silberman Galleries, New York | Sold in 1953 by a Zurich art dealer to the E.G. Bührle Collection in Zurich
Augustine, seen almost from the rear, kneels on a cloud holding a heart pierced by an arrow towards Heaven. Two putti clasp the heavy yellow cape, a third is seated on the right with a Bible, mitre and crozier. The bold stances taken by this zealous, violent saint indicate a Counter-Reformation spirit. All the figures were implemented with a light, assured brush on a pale ground between grey-brown clouds, lending palpable effect to every shade of colour.



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“The Prophet Elijah on the Golden Chariot”
(lost)



Peter Paul Rubens
“The Prophet Elijah on the Golden Chariot”
Oil on wood, 32.5 x 43 cm
© Friedenstein Stiftung Gotha, Fotoarchiv
This oil sketch is listed as lost on the Lost Art database.

Inventory of 1721: Acquisition by Duke Friedrich II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg “from the catalogue of Baron Gotter” | Removed to Coburg in March 1945 | E. & A. Silberman Galleries, New York | The last identifiable owner was the collection of George M. Baer († 2009) of Atlanta, Georgia. | By 1997 at the latest, the sketch was verifiably on loan to the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. It is unclear whether it is still there.

Elijah in a red robe and flapping cape stands looking back with outstretched arms on the burning golden chariot as it is pulled to the left across dark clouds by flame-spewing white horses.