

The Corpus Christi *Adoration of the Shepherds*

By Gregory Martin

In the Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum in Braunschweig is a *modello* by Rubens for an *Adoration of the Shepherds*, which hitherto has been associated with the large altarpiece in the Munich Alte Pinakothek, that Rubens painted for the Catholic convert, Count Palatine Wolfgang Wilhelm of Neuberg ca. 1619. There are however significant differences in the two compositions, and Julius Held, in his magisterial study of Rubens's oil sketches, opined that 'it is by no means certain that the sketch was painted for this picture.'¹

His hesitation can now be confirmed for in the college chapel is an altarpiece – known to members of the College over six generations (and referred to in publications of 1854² and 1974³) but totally unknown to Rubens scholars. The Corpus Christi *Adoration*, on canvas, ca. 158 x 258 cm., has evidently suffered; it cannot be described as in good condition. Nevertheless its impact, as one enters the chapel, is considerable and enhanced by the striking colours, whose intensity has doubtless been revived by Claire Waterhouse's cleaning of the painting last year.

Your contributor took Professor Arnout Balis – a leading Rubens expert of his generation – to examine the painting; he was also of the opinion that it was executed in Rubens's studio by an assistant working from the Braunschweig *modello* under Rubens's supervision. Most likely the master himself brought to life certain passages by his personal intervention, for instance in the prominent calf of the elderly shepherd in the face of St. Joseph, and in the direction of the protagonists' looks

In fact the picture caused a sufficient stir in Oxford for it to be mentioned in a guidebook of 1811. The chapel at Corpus was thus described: 'In 1676 it was adorned with a floor of black and white marble and a roof wainscoted and gilt. The altarpiece is a very capital picture by Rubens, consisting of five figures as large as life, and an infant Saviour. It came from the collection of the Prince of Condé at Chantilly, who gave 3000 louis d'ors for it. The late Sir Richard Worsley Bart, formerly a member of this society, presented it in 1804, when the former altarpiece, a copy of Guido's Annunciation, was removed to Balden Church near Nuneham.'⁴ The copy of Guido Reni's *Annunciation* is recorded in St. Peter's Church, Marsh Baldon, where it was installed by the lord of the manor, Sir Christopher Willoughby, 1806.⁵ He had presented it to Corpus in 1796.

The Château of Chantilly, the residence of the Grand Condé (1621-1686), passed by descent to his grandson Louise-Henri de Bourbon, prince de Condé and duc de Bourbon (1692-1740) and then to his son Louis-Joseph de Bourbon, prince de Condé (1737-1818). It was demolished during the Revolution and its contents sold. There is a record of a painting by Rubens then being sold from the chapel.⁶

The *Adoration* would presumably have been acquired during the interlude in the war with France following the Peace of Amiens in 1802. It is not as yet known when the prince de Condé bought the picture and from whom. For what it is worth, the picture is not mentioned in Dulaure's account of Chantilly, published in 1786.⁷ The dictionary of National

Biography gives a fairly full account of its donor to the college, Sir Richard Worsley, Bart., (1751-1805) – courtier, Member of Parliament, traveller and famed antiquary – and of his notoriously unfaithful wife.

The altarpiece is sadly in a far lower league than the magnificent *Adoration of the Kings*, which was given to King's College, Cambridge over thirty years ago.⁸ However Corpus Christi can claim to have been probably the first institution in England to have had on display a comparable work since the Crucifixion in the Queen's Chapel at Somerset House, London, was destroyed by a Puritan member of Parliament, Sir John Clotworthy, in 1643,⁹ and second to be the only institution in Great Britain, after King's College, to have on show an altarpiece that emanated from Rubens's studio.

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Notes

¹ See Julius Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens, A Critical Catalogue*, 1980, I, no. 323, and II, pl. 320.

² See *A History of the County of Oxford*, ed. H. Slater and M. Lobel, 3, 1954, p. 226 as by Rubens.

³ J. Sherwood and N. Pevsner, *The Buildings of England, Oxfordshire*, 1974, p. 131, where minimally referred to as school of Rubens.

⁴ *A New Pocket Companion to Oxford*, printed for J. Cooke, 1811 ed., p. 100. See also J. Ingram, *Memorials of Oxford*, II, 1837, Corpus Christi College, pp. 12-13.

⁵ See *A History of the County of Oxford*, ed M. Lobel, 5, 1957, p.46.

⁶ *Inventaire des Collections Publiques Francaises, 16, Institut de France, I, Chantilly Museum Conde peinture de l'Ecole Francaise*, 1970, Introduction (unpaginated).

⁷ J. A. Dulaure, *Nouvelle description des environs de Paris*, 1986 (where horses are alphabetically listed).

⁸ See M. Jaffe, Rubens, *Catalogo Completo*, 1989, no 1095.

⁹¹⁰ See A. J. Loomie, 'The destruction of the Rubens's Crucifixion in the Queen's Chapel, Somerset House', *The Burlington Magazine*, 1998, pp. 680-682.