LOT 55
PROPERTY FROM A PRIVATE COLLECTION
SIR PETER PAUL RUBENS
SIEGEN 1577 - 1640 ANTWERP
THE ANNUNCIATION
oil on panel
42 by 31.4 cm.; 16 1/2 by 12 3/8 in.

ESTIMATE £2,000,000-3,000,000 GBP
Lot Sold: £3,162,500 GBP

PROVENANCE
Ludwig Borchardt (1863–1938), Basel;
His widow, Emilie, née Cohen (1877–1948);
By whom sold, Lucerne, Galerie Fischer, 20–24 May 1941, lot 1027 (as Flemish School);
With Charles Albert de Burlet, Basel;  
Private Collection, Switzerland;  
With Robert Noortman, Maastricht;  
Acquired from the above by the present owner.

EXHIBITED
Rotterdam, Boymans Museum van Beuningen, Olieverfschetsen van Rubens, 1953–54, no. 59;  
Antwerp, Rubenshuis, 2004–08, on loan.

LITERATURE
E. Haverkamp Begemann, in the exhibition catalogue, Olieverfschetsen van Rubens, 1953–54, p. 75, no. 59;  
M. Jaffé, Rubens, Milan 1989, p. 306, cat. no. 918, reproduced;  
To be included in forthcoming volume V/1 of the Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard: The Life of Christ before the Passion, by H. Vlieghe and H. Devisscher, as no. 3a, currently in preparation.

CATALOGUE NOTE
More than any other painter of the Northern Baroque, Rubens' artistic personality and skill is revealed in his oil sketches, a part of his working method to which he himself attached the greatest importance. Untrammelled by the possible intervention of the studio or the whims of a patron, like no other works they bear witness to his extraordinary powers as a composer and colourist. Although not the first artist to make them, Rubens certainly used such sketches to an extent that had not been seen before, and indeed his mastery of this vibrant medium has never really been equalled. The sketches formed an essential part of his creative process; in them he would flesh out in paint his ideas for a composition, perhaps relying upon earlier drawings in which the outlines of the design were first intimated, and from which he would now build up a more fully resolved idea of his painting in terms of both composition and (importantly) colour. These oil sketches were much prized at the time – Bellori famously wrote of the ‘gran prontezza e furia del penello’ ('the great speed and fury of his brush') – not least by Rubens himself, and they have been accorded great value ever since, for they remain among the most sought after of his works.

This exceptional sketch served as the preliminary study or modello for the large altarpiece of the same subject today in the Rubenshuis in Antwerp (fig.1). That so large a painting – over three metres in height – should find itself condensed into such a small and vibrant panel is entirely typical of Rubens' oil sketches. The finished canvas was almost certainly acquired from Rubens during his stay in Spain between 1628–29 by the great Spanish collector Diego Messia, Marquis of Leganés (1580–1655), (fig. 2), and the sketch was no doubt painted at, or shortly before, this date, most probably in Spain as well. Besides having a rounded top, the sketch differs from the finished painting in several details. The Virgin here kneels with one knee on the step of the prie-dieu beside her, while in the painting she places both knees upon it. The putti dropping flowers on her from above are more fully resolved in the painting and shown at full-length. As well as elaborating on the symbolically important still life of flowers in a glass vase in the centre of the design, Rubens works out the details of the Virgin's sewing by placing it in a basket, and adds in addition to this an open bible on the prie-dieu and a sleeping cat is now to be found curled up peacefully beside the basket. In both works Mary is shown turning from her prayer towards the figure of the Archangel Gabriel, who has just entered her
room. She is clad modestly in a white gown, with a pale blue robe draped over it. Gabriel wears shimmering raiment in which both pink and yellow hues predominate, with the shadows rendered in a pale lilac. Behind them the space of Mary’s chamber is enclosed by a warm red curtain, while little touches of different colours denote the petals and flowers that the two putti drop from above it, and these in turn echo those of the blooms in the glass vase upon her table. In the finished painting these flowers can be clearly seen as roses, symbolic both of Mary herself, who Christian tradition referred to as ‘the rose without thorns’, and also more specifically of the Immaculate Conception to come. The simple domestic atmosphere of her chamber also serves to accentuate Mary’s ordinariness. The presence of the sewing materials reveals her as a normal woman preoccupied with normal household tasks; the flowers and the glass vase on the table behind her are equally symbolic of her purity and humility.

Both the present sketch and the altarpiece in the Rubenshuis seem to have been the last of Rubens’ paintings devoted to the subject of the Annunciation. As Julius Held noted, in his successive treatments of the theme Rubens seems to have moved towards a more dynamic evocation of the scene by varying the figure of the angel Gabriel. In his earliest approaches to the subject, such as that painted shortly after his return from Italy around 1609–10 for the Brotherhood of the Jesuit Sodality of Married Men, and today in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, Rubens had depicted the angel kneeling before the Virgin. Shortly after, on the external wings of the triptych of Saint Stephen at Valenciennes, painted around 1615–16, now in Valenciennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rubens shows the angel crouching on clouds above the standing Virgin. Gabriel appears in full flight first in an oil sketch for the ceiling decorations in the Jesuit Church in Antwerp, executed around 1620, and now in the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna. A very similar sketch, but of rectangular not oval format, is preserved in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford. Held also drew attention to a related drawing made by Rubens for the 1627 edition of the Breviarium Romanum, now in the Albertina in Vienna, in which the Virgin is shown kneeling at a prie-dieu, and a sewing basket is also introduced, though somewhat less prominently (fig. 3).

The evident parallels between the sketch and the Albertina drawing of 1627 would seem to support a dating of this sketch to the years 1628–29 when Rubens was in Spain, and when the finished altarpiece was probably acquired by the Marquis de Leganés. More recently, however, Hans Devisscher (see Literature) suggested that the altarpiece itself may have been created in more than one phase. While the dynamic and more fluidly painted figure of the Archangel is indeed typical of Rubens’ style in the 1620s, he suggests that the figure of the Virgin and the still-life elements are more typical of Rubens’ more descriptive and detailed style around 1614–15. This implies that the finished altarpiece may have been left unfinished – for reasons unknown – and then picked up again and completed by Rubens at a later date, during or shortly before his departure for Spain, at which time the earlier phase of the composition (the figure of the Virgin Mary) was much reworked. If Devisscher’s suggestion is correct then the sketch here would have a much earlier dating, to around 1614–15, but such a view has not been shared by other scholars. Havekamp-Begemann evidently observed variations in quality within the canvas and suggested that the Rubenshuis painting was partly the work of assistants in the Rubens studio, but continued to date it to around 1628–29. Jaffé equally assigns it a date around 1628. And in the forthcoming volume of the Corpus Rubenianum devoted to the Life of Christ before the Passion, Devisscher and Hans de Vlieghé have returned to a dating in the late 1620s. This dating has now been endorsed by recent dendronchronological of the panel itself by Ian Tyers, which shows a felling date of after circa 1615, thus making a date of execution in the 1620s entirely plausible but an earlier dating of 1614-15 impossible.

Even if the date of this sketch and the finished picture has been the subject of discussion, little reasonable doubt attaches to the identity of the latter’s first known owner. In the inventory of the Leganés art collection, drawn up on March 30, 1642, no. 264 is described as: ‘Una annunziazion de nra. Senora y un angel, de mano de Rubens, de 4 baras de alto y 2 ymedia de ancho, el cielo en oualo, y lagunos angeles hechando flores, y una cesta con la labor de nra senora, y un gato al pie ella en 5,000’, (‘An Annunciation with our Lady and an angel, by the hand of Rubens, 4 by 2 ½ varas, the sky in oval, and a few angels who scatter flowers, a basket with the work of Our Lady and a cat at her feet, 5,000’). Diego Messia, Marquis of Leganés (1580–1655) rose to prominence at the archducal court in Brussels and became commander of the Spanish cavalry and artillery in the Spanish Netherlands. He married Doña Policena Spinola, the daughter of Ambrogio Spinola, the commander-in-chief of the Spanish armies in 1627, and his
immense wealth made him one of the greatest of all collectors in Spain and the Spanish Netherlands in the seventeenth century. At his death his collection contained 1333 works, with a heavy leaning towards works of the Italian and Flemish schools, but also including Spanish pictures. His portrait was also painted by Rubens (Private Collection) and he numbered several works by him in his collection, including landscapes. Rubens himself praised the Marquis as one of the most important collectors of his time. Despite his precautions, however, disputed inheritance led to the dispersal of the collection in the decades following his death in 1655.

We are grateful to Esther Tisa Francini for her assistance with the cataloguing of the provenance of this work.

6. Report 696, dated May 2014. A copy of this is available for inspection in the Department.
7. A vara is approximately 83.5 cm., thus giving a size around 334 x 209 cm. The Rubenshuis canvas measures 310 x 187.6 cm., but such variations are common because the dimensions seem to be given to the nearest half vara, and many works that can definitely be identified with those listed in the inventory (by surviving inventory number for example) display similar discrepancies.

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Fig. 1

Peter Paul Rubens, The Annunciation, Antwerp, Rubenshuis
© Collectiebeleid

Fig. 2

Peter Paul Rubens, Don Diego Messía (Mexía) Felipe de Guzmán, Marquis von Leganés, © Albertina, Vienna

Fig. 3

Peter Paul Rubens, The Annunciation, © Albertina, Vienna