

Pietro Paolo Rubens

(Sieegen 1577 – Anversa 1640)

Adorazione dei Pastori

Olio su tavola 72,5 x 57,5 cm

1618-1619 ca.

Collezione privata

Bibliografia: G. M. Pilo, D. Bodart, *Il modello di P. P. Rubens per l'Adorazione dei Pastori già nella chiesa dei Gesuiti di Neuburg*, in "Arte Documento", 22, 2006, pp. 172-181.

The panel depicts the Adoration of the Shepherds; Mary is uncovering the baby Jesus, who is also the source of light for the entire painting, while on the right is a crowd of commoners and shepherds coming to pray to the Saviour. It is a stupendous composition, all played out by oblique paths and luminous contrasts. In the foreground, the ox and donkey against the light act as a theatrical backdrop and emphasise the divine light source.

The panel, which appears to be made of oak or oak, consists of two short planks glued together in the centre and the painting is in an excellent state of preservation. In fact, no noteworthy damage can be seen apart from a few abrasions, as is normal for paintings of this period and style, as the liquid and fast painting is typical of this phase of Flemish painting.

The bibliography on the work is unanimous in attributing it to Peter Paul Rubens and in indicating this painting as the sketch for a larger composition, the Adoration of the Shepherds for the Jesuit church in Neuburg, but now kept in Munich at the Bayerisches Staatsgemaldehysammlungen in Schleissheim Castle.

The first to concern himself with this painting, with a written communication to the owner, was Fritz Novotny, director of the Belvedere Gallery in Vienna who, in addition to undoubtedly attributing the panel to Rubens, pointed out on the back of the painting the presence of the

symbols of the Guild of St. Luke, the Antwerp guild of painters, to which Rubens obviously belonged.

Later, it was Giuseppe Maria Pilo who studied the work and published it in *Arte Documento* with the results of a scientific study on the pigment proving its antiquity. Strictly speaking, when a painting is of such high quality as the one in question, the analysis of the pigment only serves to understand whether there have been repaintings, because it is the style that is the first documentation that certifies its antiquity and attribution. In that case, however, the analysis accurately dated the work to the beginning of the 17th century. The scholar recognised that this panel could be the sketch for the Neuburg altarpiece and dated it around 1618/19, precisely in relation to the Jesuit painting.

Another, much smaller and possibly earlier version of this composition exists, which has a very high painting speed and is probably the first sketch for this Adoration and is kept in Brunswick, in the extraordinary Herzog-Anton-Ulrich Museum.

A comparison of the three versions (without taking into account workshop copies, counterpoint derivations from engravings and even a possibly preparatory drawing in the Lugt collection at the Dutch Institute in Paris) makes it immediately clear that there is a direct correspondence between the three works.

Brunswick's sketch is a first idea, painted as always with a thin brush, sketching only shapes and encumbrances, with a truly impressive speed of brushstroke and drafting.

The version presented here, on the other hand, appears with a higher degree of finish and the painter not only studied the composition, but also, and above all, the internal lighting of the work, a little like he did for the famous Adoration of the Shepherds in the Pinacoteca del Palazzo dei Priori in Fermo, painted, however, in Rome in the middle of the first decade of the 17th century.

The details of the panel painting presented here are of the highest quality throughout. Note, for example, the head of the kneeling shepherd, his lost profile illuminated by divine light; behind him a mature man approaches in prayer and one can also read the motion of his soul, full of pity. Nearby, again, a shepherd does not hold back his astonishment, while the woman beside him is one of the most intense and charged portraits of the painter's entire production.

The work, therefore, certainly stands as an autograph by Rubens, and is probably not one of the last versions of the Adoration now in Munich, because in the final version there are many variations both in the characters in the foreground and in the general composition, with the

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striking theory of angels at the top, which suggests that this panel painting is above all a study for light.

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