

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
Washington, D. C.

REpublic 7-4215 - Ext. 315

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IMPORTANT GIFTS TO NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D. C.: John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today the Gallery's acquisition of an important painting by the greatest Flemish artist of the seventeenth century, Peter Paul Rubens. The painting, representing the Old Testament subject of The Meeting of Abraham and Melchizedek, was recently purchased for the National Gallery of Art with funds donated by Mrs. Syma Busiel. "This gift," Mr. Walker said, "equals in high quality and significance Mrs. Busiel's donation last year of Houdon's superb marble bust of Diana."

Perry B. Cott, Chief Curator of the National Gallery, describes the painting by Rubens in its connection with the great series of the Triumph of the Eucharist. "This series," he states, "was commissioned of Rubens about 1625 by the Infanta Isabella (widow of Archduke Albert of Austria) to be carried out in Brussels tapestries for the Convent of the Poor Clares in Madrid, where the tapestries are still preserved. Small preliminary sketches by Rubens for some of the compositions in the series are now known, notably those in the Prado, Madrid. Several of the full-size cartoons, executed with the help of assistants, are also preserved. But the painting now acquired for the National Gallery holds a unique place in this major commission. It is neither a preliminary sketch nor a working cartoon, but a finished painting on a small scale (oil on panel, 26 in. high; 32 1/2 in. wide).

It is presumably the modello presented

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to the Infanta as a specimen of the inventive and sumptuous effect she could expect from the whole series. In this series, devoted to the dogma of the Eucharist, the scene from Genesis of Melchizedek offering bread and wine to Abraham is suitable as an Old Testament prefiguration of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The elaborate setting, of enframing columns and angel-borne curtains and garlands, was repeated in endless variation in the other compositions and so served to unite all the scenes into a great ensemble."

The panel of Abraham and Melchizedek is well known from public exhibitions of Rubens down through the last hundred years. It has been published and praised by Rubens scholars since the time of Smith's Catalogue Raisonné and Max Rooses' monumental volumes on the artist. And it has been enthusiastically recorded in distinguished collections since it was first catalogued, in 1767, among the paintings owned by Watteau's famous patron, Jean de Jullienne, Paris. There Watteau, who was influenced all his life by Rubens, saw and admired the painting: as tangible evidence we have a drawing by Watteau after the head of the old man immediately behind Melchizedek.

As the panel of Abraham and Melchizedek now given by Miss Busiel is the work of the greatest Flemish painter of the seventeenth century, so the bust of Diana which she gave to the National Gallery in 1957 is by the most distinguished French sculptor of the eighteenth century. Carved of Carrara marble, the bust is signed by Houdon and dated 1778, the year after he had exhibited it in the Paris Salon and two years before he completed his famous full-length Diana. At the close of the Salon exhibition of 1777, Houdon seems to have followed the familiar practice of returning the marble to his studio for final finishing before adding his signature and the date, 1778. As we see the bust today, the subtle execution of features and the effect of wind-swept hair are of extraordinary beauty, assuring the work a place among Houdon's most exquisite masterpieces.