

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
Washington, D. C.

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THE NATIONAL GALLERY ANNOUNCES TWO IMPORTANT
GIFTS

Washington, October 15: John Walker, Director of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, announced today the acquisition of two masterworks purchased for the Gallery with funds donated by Mrs. Syma Busiel.

"Both gifts are indeed important additions to the heritage of great art that has been assembled in our national capital," said Mr. Walker.

Of the first work, a marble bust of DIANA by Houdon, Director Walker said:

"This sculpture is a superb example of the work of the great 18th century French master Jean-Antoine Houdon. It was carved in Carrara marble, a classic sculptor's material especially beloved by Houdon for its luminous beauty under any light.

"Although Houdon first exhibited the bust of Diana in the Paris Salon of 1777, it is interesting to note that afterward he followed the custom of the times and took the marble back to his studio for further work and for what might be termed his final appraisal. A year later, satisfied that it measured up to his own exquisite standards of perfection, Houdon released his creation and carved the date 1778 and his signature beneath the right arm.

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"It is worth adding that our particular DIANA preceded by about two years Houdon's famous, full-length 'Diana,' once owned by Catherine the Great of Russia and now in the collection of the late C. S. Gulbenkian in Paris."

The second work obtained by the National Gallery through the generosity of Mrs. Busiel is a very important panel from the hand of the greatest Flemish artist of the 17th century, Peter Paul Rubens. This painting is part of a series commissioned from Rubens by the Infanta Isabella of Spain about 1625. The whole series was devoted to The Triumph of the Eucharist, and Rubens' paintings were the basis of the Brussels tapestries woven for the Convent of the Poor Clares in Madrid. All 20 of the finished tapestries are hanging there to this day.

It is known that Rubens considered this commission a major one in his rich, full career and he made many preliminary sketches for it. Eight of these sketches are preserved in the Prado, Madrid. But the particular painting acquired by the National Gallery of Art, THE MEETING OF ABRAHAM AND MELCHIZEDEK, holds a unique place in the series. It is a finished painting on a wood panel, 26" x 32 1/2". It is developed in such detail that there is little doubt that the picture was the "modello" - or visualization - presented to the Infanta Isabella to illustrate the effect she could expect from the whole tapestry series.

This picture is well known from public exhibitions of Rubens' work down through the last hundred years. It has been published and praised by Rubens scholars since the time of Smith's Catalogue Raisonné (1830) and is especially acclaimed in Max Roose's

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monumental volumes on the artist. It was first catalogued in 1767, in the great collection of paintings owned by Watteau's famous patron, Jean de Jullienne, in Paris. There, Watteau, who all his life was influenced by Rubens, saw and admired the painting. Evidence of that admiration exists in a drawing by Watteau which he copied after the head of the old man who can be seen just to the right and behind Rubens' portrayal of Melchizedek.

"We are indeed fortunate," concluded Mr. Walker, "to have secured these masterpieces for the National Gallery. We sincerely hope that gifts such as Mrs. Busiel's will be forthcoming from other benefactors in all parts of the country.

"It is appropriate for the National Gallery of Washington, standing as it does in the capital city of a great nation, to welcome, even seek universal support from distinguished citizens everywhere."

The Houdon DIANA is exhibited in Gallery 60. The Rubens MEETING OF ABRAHAM AND MELCHIZEDEK is exhibited in Gallery 42.

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