

# NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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## NATIONAL GALLERY DISPLAYS NEWLY ACQUIRED RUBENS

Washington, D.C., May 25, 1990 -- A major early Rubens painting, The Fall of Phaeton, c. 1605 (36 1/4 x 47 5/8 in.), recently acquired and cleaned by the National Gallery of Art, will go on exhibition on May 30 for the first time, director J. Carter Brown announced. The date coincides with the 350th anniversary of the death of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640).

A painting of complex design and explosive energy, The Fall of Phaeton illustrates the dramatic scene from Ovid's Metamorphoses when the son of Apollo is thrown from his horsedrawn chariot in the heavens by a thunderbolt cast by Jupiter. It is the earliest Rubens in the Gallery's collection, the only representation by him of a mythological theme, and the first work that demonstrates the drama and exuberance of his most baroque creations. It will hang with other works by Rubens in the National Gallery collection in gallery 45 of the West Building.

The Fall of Phaeton has been purchased with income from the Patrons' Permanent Fund. It is exhibited in an Italian period frame, acquired specifically for the work. Except for its inclusion in an exhibition in Cologne in 1977, when it was not in its present cleaned state, the painting has not previously been publicly displayed.

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"Aside from the element of pure visual excitement, the painting provides an unparalleled glimpse of the great master's artistic development and working method," said Brown. "Thanks to the generosity of donors to the Patrons' Permanent Fund, we are able to add to our collection this important early work that previews many later trends in Rubens' art."

The chaos resulting from the unseen thunderbolt is the source of the tremendous sense of movement in The Fall of Phaeton. As Phaeton's chariot disintegrates, his steeds bolt in all directions. The winged female figures, desperately trying to control the horses, react in awe and fear at the searing light.

Rubens, generally regarded as the greatest of all baroque painters, was born in Siegen, Germany in 1577. He trained with some of the foremost masters in Antwerp before being admitted to the St. Luke's Guild in 1598. In 1600 he departed for Italy where he entered the service of Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, probably through the influence of Archduke Albert, regent of the Netherlands. During his stay in Italy, which lasted until 1608, he traveled widely and studied the art of antiquity and masterpieces from the Renaissance, as well as the most contemporary of Italian paintings. The careful copies he made of these works served as the basis for ideas in his art for the remainder of his life. His success in Italy was tremendous and he received many important commissions during his stay there.

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The story of Phaeton was a favorite subject for many sixteenth-century artists including Michelangelo, Guilio Romano, Luca Cambiaso, Frans Floris, and Pieter Brueghel, to whom Rubens may have looked for inspiration. The powerful movement depicted in the work also reflects the dramatic representations of tumbling figures and rearing horses that he studied in battle scenes by Leonardo da Vinci and Raphael. Finally, Rubens' forceful use of light derives from his knowledge of paintings by Tintoretto and Adam Elsheimer.

Rubens was midway through his formative nine-year stay in Italy when he painted The Fall of Phaeton. The early history of the painting, including whether it was commissioned by a patron, is unknown. The National Gallery's collection of paintings by Rubens is dominated by Daniel in the Lion's Den, a quietly powerful work of 1613-1615 that contrasts with the dynamism of The Fall of Phaeton.

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