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OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

DRAFT

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FRANS FRANCKEN the Younger
(1581 – Antwerp – 1642)

The Rape of the Sabine Women

Signed, lower right: *franck... .. f.*
Oil on panel, 22 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$ ins. (58 x 81 cm)



PROVENANCE

Private collection, Belgium, for at least 50 years, until 2021

The most famous and productive member of a large family of artists, Frans Francken the Younger was born in Antwerp in 1581. He trained with his father Frans the Elder (1542-1616), and joined the Antwerp painters' guild in 1605. His reputation rests chiefly on his small-scale cabinet pictures with religious, mythological or allegorical themes, though he painted many other genres as well. He is remembered for his role in introducing several new themes into Flemish painting, such as the depiction of the interiors of art galleries (*kunstkammern* or *cabinets d'amateurs*), or genre scenes populated by monkeys (*singeries*).

The story of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* is related by several classical authors. Although accounts vary, the key elements of the story are consistent. Romulus, the founder of Rome, built an impressive city, but he realised that there were not enough Roman women to ensure the future growth in population of the young nation, so he devised a ruse to overcome this problem. He invited the neighbouring Sabines to come to a festival, together with their wives and children. During the celebrations, at a given signal, the young men of Rome stormed the crowd, abducting the young, unmarried women and driving off their relatives. Three years later, the Sabines took revenge by attacking Rome, but the conflict was prevented by the women, who stood between their brothers and their Roman husbands, to whom they had become reconciled. Thus peace between the two peoples was achieved.

Francken has chosen to illustrate the episode of the abduction itself. The scene is set in a city square against the backdrop of a triumphal arch. Festival-goers throng the city centre, where a theatrical performance is underway on a temporary stage and fireworks are being let off. Romulus is seen in the left of centre foreground astride a grey horse, clad in a red cloak and plumed helmet, and looking directly at the viewer. Responding to his command, soldiers on foot and on horseback force their way into the crowd, seizing the Sabine maidens as they go. A melee of wildly gesticulating figures fills the square and confusion reigns. The terrified young women do their best to resist their capture with waving arms and imploring expressions, while the older women try in vain to protect them. A particularly poignant scene is unfolding in the left foreground, where a little group of older women, mothers and frightened small children watch in horror as armed soldiers drag their daughters away. Francken has emphasised the muscular physique of the Roman soldiers in contrast to the pale skin of the defenceless women in order to heighten the sense of violence and drama. The characterisation of the figures, especially the women with their wild eyes and exaggerated gestures, as well as the bright, transparent colours and glazy technique are typical of Francken's work from the 1630s.

The theme of abduction was a popular subject in painting from the sixteenth century onwards. Francken, who excelled at large crowd scenes, no doubt seized upon the story because it offered him the opportunity to depict large numbers of intertwined male and female bodies, as well as an expressive range of gestures and emotions. As was often Francken's practice, he treated the subject on more than one occasion: there is a version in the Musée e'Art et d'Histoire in Hazebrouck, France, and another, which passed through Christie's auction rooms in 1942, is recorded in Ursula Härting's 1989 *catalogue raisonné* of the painter's work. Although these variants share certain motifs, the compositions are largely different in conception.

BIOGRAPHY OF THE PAINTER

One of six children born to the painter Frans Francken the Elder and Elisabeth Mertens, Frans the Younger was baptised in the Cathedral of our Lady in Antwerp on 6 May 1581. Frans II and three of his brothers – Thomas (c. 1574-after 1639), Ambrosius II (1581-1632) and Hieronymus II (1578-1623) - followed in the footsteps of their father Frans I, and their uncles Hieronymus I (1540-1610) and Ambrosius I (1544-1618), becoming painters. It is assumed that Frans the Younger served his apprenticeship in the studio of his father, but also probably trained in Paris with his uncle Hieronymus I. In 1605, Frans II became a master of the Antwerp Guild of St. Luke. In 1607, he married Elisabeth Placquet, and by August of the same year he had bought a house in the Nieuwe Kerkstraat – achter St. Andries. The couple had seven children, four of whom survived until adulthood, and three - Frans Francken III (1607-1667) Hieronymus Francken III (1611-1661/81) and Ambrosius Francken (1614-c.1662) - became painters.

In 1615 Frans II was elected Dean of the guild, and the following year he bought a house with a gateway near the 'iron weighbridge' at the Boksteeg. He became extremely successful and operated a large studio. However, only one pupil, Daniel Hagen, is recorded in the guild records in 1616/17, but Francken may have been exempted from the obligation of reporting apprentices to the guild. Alternatively, he may have been able to run his studio only with the assistance of members of his own family. Documents reveal that he worked directly for the art dealer Christian van Immerzeel through whom many of his paintings were exported to Seville between 1624 and 1635. His greatest skill was as a figure painter and he collaborated with at least twenty of the leading landscape, still-life and architectural painters of the day including Jan Brueghel the Younger, Abraham Govaerts, Joos de Momper II, Tobias Verhaecht, Bartholomeus van Bassen, Pieter Neefs I and II, Hendrick van Steenwijck and Paul Vredeman de Vries. Frans Francken the Younger died on 6 May 1642 and was buried in the Church of St. Andries in Antwerp.

