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OLD MASTER PAINTINGS

VP4920

PIETER SCHOUBROECK

(Hessheim c. 1570 – 1607 Frankenthal)

The Israelites rescued from the drunken Elephants of
King Ptolemy IV Philopator

Oil on copper, 25¼ x 32½ ins. (64 x 83 cm)

Signed and dated, lower right, *1605/ PE · SCHAVBRVCK / FE · FRANCKEN..AL.*



PROVENANCE

Private collection, Bonn, Germany, for several decades, until 2020

Only fragments of Pieter Schoubroeck's life story have come down to us. The son of a Calvinist theologian and preacher from Antwerp, he was born near Frankenthal in Germany around 1570. Like scores of Flemish artists of his generation, who were displaced from their homeland by religious persecution and war, he led a peripatetic life. Whilst some artists sought refuge in the Northern Netherlands, Schoubroeck spent most of his life moving between safe havens in Protestant Germany. He died relatively young leaving only a small oeuvre.

Despite living in exile for much of his life, Schoubroeck's art remained entirely Flemish in character. He specialised in fantastic landscapes with dramatic biblical or mythological subjects, and scenes of disaster, such as the burning of Troy. Typically, his scenes are populated by numerous brightly coloured, tiny figures, which are illuminated by the slanting rays of sunlight, or flames from conflagrations. The various influences to which Schoubroeck was exposed during his peregrinations are evident in his work. In Frankenthal, he found inspiration in the forest landscapes of Gillis van Coninxloo III (1544-1607), who was the key figure in the so-called 'Frankenthal School', a small group of Flemish émigré painters to which Schoubroeck himself belonged. Also decisive in the formation of his style was a trip to Rome in 1595, where he encountered the work of Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568-1625), whose jewel-like colours, and precise, miniaturist manner of painting on copper panels Schoubroeck largely adopted.

This large painting on copper is an outstanding example of Schoubroeck's work. The story depicted is taken from the Third Book of Maccabees, in the Apocrypha. The tale is convoluted, but in summary, it relates that after the battle of Raphia in 217, King Ptolemy IV Philopator tried to visit the Temple in Jerusalem, but was denied entry. As a result, he developed a bitter grudge against the Jews, and after returning to Alexandria, he resolved to have all the Jews in his kingdom rounded up and massacred in the city's hippodrome. However, his plans were repeatedly thwarted by godly intervention, so he finally ordered his soldiers to get his five hundred war elephants drunk on wine and then goad them into trampling the Jews underfoot. However, the Jews prayed fervently to their God, who responded by sending two angels to intervene, ensuring that the elephants turned instead upon the soldiers. The king thereupon recanted and granted extensive privileges to the Jews.

In this astonishingly detailed account, Schoubroeck has taken some liberties with the story, setting his scene in a vast panoramic landscape instead of the hippodrome at Alexandria. On the left, sheer craggy peaks, bristling with pine forests, rise steeply from undulating lowlands. A fortress, perched on a rocky outcrop, occupies the centre of the composition, beneath which King Ptolemy's troops have pitched their tents. On the right, the land drops away to the sea, and a hazy blue prospect, with distant coastal cities. In the left foreground, we see the assembled Jews - men, women and children - pictured on their knees, praying fervently, while two would-be escapees, their hands tied behind their backs, are being escorted back by an armed guard. Riding amongst them on a white horse, flanked by a soldier in armour, is a figure of authority, perhaps King Ptolemy himself, or one of his generals. In the centre foreground, a soldier and a man in a turban point in amazement towards the sky where the miracle of God's intervention is unfolding. Descending from heaven in a brilliant shaft of light are two angels. Below, chaos has broken out among the ranks of drunken elephants, which now stampede, trampling their handlers underfoot. In the *melée* of figures and animals,

hundreds upon hundreds of tiny figures on foot or on horseback can be seen fleeing into the far distance.

This signed and dated painting of 1605 displays all the hallmarks of Schoubroeck's mature style. The elevated viewpoint, steep rocky peaks, panoramic vistas, tripartite colour scheme (brown, green and blue, in progressive recession), and the alternating bands of dark and light that lend depth to the scene are all features of the Antwerp landscape tradition in which he had been trained. Especially evocative here is the use of strongly lit passages, and darkened motifs seen in silhouette, that serve to direct the eye around the composition and highlight key aspects of the story. The richness of detail, the glowing colours and delicacy of touch recall the early landscapes of Jan Brueghel the Elder to which the artist is strongly indebted. The motif of the horse's skeleton lying in the foreground shadows is also characteristic of Brueghel.

The subject of the persecution of the Jews under King Ptolemy IV Philopator is a highly unusual one in Netherlandish art. However, it is not entirely without precedent, for it was also depicted by the Flemish artist Gillis van Valckenborch I (1570-1622), in a painting, dated 1597, in the Palais du Louvre, Paris (Fig. 1), and another closely related work in the Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, in Brunswick¹. However, it is not precisely clear what is the relationship between the compositions of the two artists, but it seems likely that Schoubroeck was familiar with the work by Gillis van Valckenborch, his almost exact contemporary, who, like Schoubroeck, spent much of his life in exile in Germany. Although the general scheme of Schoubroeck's painting bears a resemblance to that of van Valckenborch, he has interpreted the subject in a very personal way.



Fig. 1. Gillis van Valckenborch, *The Israelites rescued from the drunken Elephants of King Ptolemy IV Philopator*, 1597, oil on canvas, 135 x 270 cm, Paris, Musée du Louvre, Paris, inv.cat. no. M.R.N. 614.

BIOGRAPHY

Peter Schoubroeck was probably born in Hessheim, near Frankenthal, in Germany, around 1570. He was the son of Nicolas Schoubroeck, a Calvinist theologian and preacher, who had fled Antwerp in 1566, the year in which the iconoclastic riots, known as the *Beeldenstorm* swept through Flanders. Together with his family, Pieter returned to Mechelen in 1582, where he was apprenticed in 1583 to the obscure painter Roment Verbiest. It is not known where he spent the following years, but it is thought that he might have stayed for a while in Frankfurt am Main, where he could have continued his training or worked with the Flemish émigrés Marten van Valckenborch (1535-1612) and Hendrick van Steenwyck the Elder (c. 1580/82-1649), who had taken refuge there. In any event, he is documented in Rome in 1595 (as is known from a dated and inscribed landscape drawing, Paris, Fond. Custodia, Institut Néerlandais), where he would have come into contact with the work of the Flemish landscapists Paul Bril (1554-1626) and Jan Brueghel the Elder. Two years later, he was back in Germany, living in Nuremberg, where in 1598 he married Catharina, the daughter of a wealthy art dealer Cornelis Caimox, and acquired citizenship. He finally returned to Frankenthal in 1600, where three of his children were born, in 1602, 1605 and in 1607. He died in Frankenthal in 1607, probably of the plague.

ⁱ Gillis van Valckenborch, *King Ptolemy IV Philopator tried to have the Jews killed by drunken Elephants*, oil on canvas, 56 x 76.5 cm, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum, Brunswick, inv./cat.no. 62 (cat. 1976).