

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Attributed to Paulus PONTIUS (Antwerp 1603 - Antwerp 1658)**

**The Virgin and Child with Saints Bonaventure, Jerome and George, after Rubens**

Black chalk, extensively heightened with white chalks.

Laid down.

Numbered 85(?) in brown ink at the lower right, and illegibly inscribed, partially cut off, in black chalk at the lower edge.

512 x 415 mm. (20 1/8 x 16 3/8 in.)

The present sheet copies the large late altarpiece of *The Virgin and Child with Saints* by Peter Paul Rubens that was intended for the artist's own tomb chapel in the Sint-Jacobskerk in Antwerp, where it remains today. As the late 19th century Rubens scholar Max Rooses has written of the altarpiece, '*It is certain that this painting was one of the last Rubens executed, that he painted it entirely with his own hand, and that he intended it to adorn his funerary chapel. He portrayed himself in St. George under emaciated, worn features - signs of his advanced age and failing health. A few days before his death, his children asked whether he would consent to having a funerary chapel built for him in the Church of St. James. With his native modesty, he replied that if his widow, his adult children, and the guardians of his minor children believed he had merited such a monument, they might build the chapel, placing in it no work of his other than a Virgin with the Christ Child in her arms, accompanied by several saints, as well as a statue of the Virgin.*' Rubens died in May 1640 and by November 1641 his heirs had agreed with the church authorities on the construction of the funerary chapel, which was to cost some 5,500 florins. This amount was paid in full by the end of 1644, by which time the altarpiece must have been installed.

As Dr. Nils Büttner of the Centrum Rubenianum in Antwerp has recently suggested, this large sheet

would appear to be a preparatory study by Paulus Pontius for his engraving of Rubens's late painting of *The Virgin and Child with Saints*, published in Antwerp by Gillis Hendricx. The print was not commissioned by Rubens, and as such this drawing is unlikely to have been executed under his supervision. Büttner further noted of the present sheet that it is '*a very high-quality copy of the painting... As a previously unknown design for the engraving, [the] drawing is of great art-historical interest.*' Both this drawing and Pontius's engraving show the composition of the Sint-Jacobskerk *Virgin and Child with Saints* as enlarged on all four sides. It is possible that Rubens's original painting was originally somewhat larger and was reduced to fit the space for the altarpiece in the chapel. Alternatively, as Rooses had suggested, Pontius may have based his engraving on a lost compositional sketch by Rubens that showed the full extent of the composition.

### **Artist description:**

Trained initially as a painter, the prolific Flemish engraver Paulus Pontius was a pupil of the printmaker Lucas Vorsterman the Elder, whom he succeeded in the workshop of the painter Peter Paul Rubens.

Pontius became a master in the Antwerp Guild and became the artist mainly responsible for reproducing Rubens's painted works in the form of engravings, working for the master from 1624 onwards. As Paul Huvenne has noted, 'Pontius proved capable of emulating Vorsterman's style. He may have been less spontaneous and virtuosic, but he worked in a more controlled and consistent manner. He would engrave fifteen plates for Rubens, but in addition, apparently at his own expense, he would produce a great deal of Rubens's graphic art.' Pontius lived in Rubens's home until the year after the master's death, and in all produced just over forty engravings after works by Rubens. He later continued to work with other leading painters in Antwerp, notably Anthony Van Dyck and Jacob Jordaens.

Very few drawings by Paulus Pontius are known, of which most have been heavily reworked by Rubens. The most significant of these are two studies for engravings made after Rubens's paintings; a drawing of *The Assumption of the Virgin* of c.1624 in the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles and a *Descent of the Holy Spirit* of 1627 in the British Museum in London. In both cases the original, underlying drawing in black chalk or brown wash by Pontius has been extensively retouched by Rubens with grey and white gouache. As Rowlands has observed of such drawings, 'The elaborate drawings made in preparation for prints after Rubens's paintings give us a close insight into the extent of the master's collaboration with his engravers. Firstly, the rather mechanical initial task of producing a drawing after the painting was generally delegated to an assistant, or perhaps to the engraver. The quality of this preliminary drawing, usually in black chalk, varies... The master then extensively reworked the sheet, using either washes reinforced with opaque grey and white bodycolour... or oils. In the process Rubens often transformed a weak drawing into a practically autograph one of superb quality. In many cases... important changes were made at this stage to adapt the original composition to suit the printed medium.'