

## SOTHEBY'S TO SELL LOST MASTERPIECE BY RUBENS

### ONE OF THE MOST EXCITING OLD MASTER PAINTING DISCOVERIES IN TWENTY YEARS



A COMPLETELY unknown early work by Sir Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), painted between 1609 and 1611, is one of the most significant Old Master Picture discoveries to be offered at auction for decades and the greatest Rubens to come to the market for more than 20 years. It is estimated at £4 to £6 million.

The Massacre of the Innocents will be sold at Sotheby's, London in a sale of Old Master Paintings on Thursday July 11, 2002. The sale will take place 22 years to the day since the last Rubens of comparable importance, Samson and Delilah, was sold at auction on July 11, 1980, to the National Gallery, London for £2.53 million.

The dramatic impact of The Massacre of the Innocents is emphasised by its exceptional state of preservation: both the painted surface and the 17th century Antwerp wooden panel remain in near perfect condition.

From the 18th century, until only a few weeks ago, when Sotheby's Senior Old Master Paintings Specialist, George Gordon correctly identified it, The Massacre of the Innocents was assumed to be by the late Rubens follower Jan van den Hoecke. Commenting on the picture, George Gordon said; "The chance to see this work is extremely exciting for collectors and scholars alike. For such a work of genius by such a great painter to languish under a false attribution to a minor artist for so long is surely an injustice, but in the end quality will out."

The painting is recorded in correspondence of the Forchoudt family - three brothers who were the most prominent and active art dealers in Antwerp at the end of the 17th Century. The first mention of the picture is in 1698 when it is discussed together with the work, Samson and Delilah, in a letter dated 13th December from Marcus Forchoudt, addressed to his brother Guillaume in Antwerp. In this letter both pictures are referred to and it is presumed that they were both then sold shortly afterwards by the Forchoudt brothers to Fürst Johann Andreas von Liechtenstein since an account, dated August 1702, refers to the division of the payment equally between the three brothers. At the time they were sold both paintings were described by the seller and acknowledged by the purchaser to be early works by Rubens. The picture still bears the original Liechtenstein family seals of 1733 and is recorded in various inventories between 1767 and 1873. Drawings of 1815 in the Liechtenstein Collection Inventories reveal that this picture was hung in the Garden Palace, Vienna, beside Samson and Delilah and in the same room as another renowned work by Rubens, The Assumption of the Virgin.

Many pictures were mis-attributed by the different compilers of the 18th century Liechtenstein inventories. Unfortunately the inventory made in 1715 on the death of Furst Johann Andreas von Liechtenstein, which is likely to have recorded the attribution under which this and other works were acquired, was lost early on. It seems not to have been available to Vincenzo Fanti, who compiled the next inventory in 1767, and The Massacre of the Innocents is here given to a Rubens follower, Frans de Neve (in the same inventory Fanti failed to recognise the famous Decius

Mus cycle as being by Rubens). By the time of the anonymous inventory of 1780 both The Massacre of the Innocents and The National Gallery Samson and Delilah were attributed to the relatively minor painter, Jan van den Hoecke – an artist who worked extensively in Vienna painting pictures in the style of Rubens and Van Dyck. Samson and Delilah was sold by the Liechtensteins in the 1880s and was recognised by the 1920s as by Rubens. The Massacre of the Innocents was sold in 1920 by the Liechtenstein family to a dealer who sold it on in the same year to the father of the present owner and its attribution to Jan van den Hoecke (1611-1651) was never questioned until now.

A relative of the owner recently brought a photograph of the work to Sotheby's saleroom in Amsterdam where Judith Niessen immediately referred it to George Gordon of the London Old Master Paintings Department. Mr Gordon recognised that the picture was of interest and went to inspect the work. Once the painting arrived in London, research and comparison with another version of the composition in Brussels, which some scholars in the absence of a better version had hitherto considered to be by Rubens, led to the conclusion that the Sotheby's Massacre of the Innocents was Rubens' lost early masterpiece. All Rubens scholars who have since seen the painting have shared this view.

Rubens began training as a painter in 1590 in Antwerp and by 1598 was invited to be a master in the Antwerp Painters Guild. In 1600, Rubens left for Italy where he spent eight formative years as a court painter to the Duke of Mantua, travelling between Venice, Rome and Mantua and was greatly influenced by the radiant colour and composition of the Renaissance and Baroque Italy and the wealth of classical sculpture and architecture. Rubens' style rapidly developed on his return to Antwerp from Rome in November 1608. Establishing precise dates for the paintings Rubens made immediately on his return to the North is difficult, as only one picture from this period is dated, and the only documented work, his Raising of the Cross commissioned for Antwerp Cathedral, was probably worked on over the course of more than a year. It is almost certain, however, that both Samson and Delilah and The Massacre of the Innocents date from 1609 to 1611, with 1610 as the most likely year.

The Massacre of the Innocents records the moment when King Herod ordered all newborn boys to be slain to prevent one becoming a Messiah. The picture is an ambitious and complex composition of interlocking figures that was entirely new to Flemish art and announces the advent of Baroque in Northern Europe. Bodies writhe and struggle within the dramatic composition, figures are linked by tension and contrast, pushing and pulling, naked and muscular against the soft, voluminous folds of drapery. A soldier attempts to stab an old woman - he pushes her head back with one hand and the sword towards her chest with the other; behind him an armoured soldier forces down the head of a young woman who protects a child behind her. The woman to the fore seems to employ all her strength to pull her child up towards her with one hand and with the other violently pushes back the face of the bearded man, who in turn is pulling at the drapery of her child. This female figure strongly resembles the figure of Delilah in the National Gallery painting. This dynamic picture is a carefully built up arrangement of classical allusions from the portico at the top taken from the Temple of Castor and Pollux in Rome to the echoes of Laocoon Goups that Rubens drew so exhaustively.

