Rombouts' *David and Abigail* in the Florida State University Gallery: An Allegory of Deliverance

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A painting of *David and Abigail* attributed to Theodore Rombouts in the the Florida State Univerity Gallery and Museum was a gift to the university from I. Austin Kelly III in 1958. The painting is unsigned, undated, and of uncertain provenance. The work has never been the object of a published study, but close examination will show that both the topic and its mode of presentation are of unusual interest. Elements anomalous to the ostensible subject of the painting identify it as an allegory, the theme of which is deliverance. Through an iconographical analysis, it is possible to draw a connection between this theme of deliverance and contemporary conditions in Antwerp in the seventeenth century.

The painting of *David and Abigail* (Figure 1) is oil on oak panels measuring 49 inches by 74 inches. A beautiful young woman is the focal point of the composition. She is richly dressed and bejeweled. Her open hands extend toward the still life in front of her which consists of several joints of meat, a fowl, a number of round loaves of bread, a large lustrous decorated ewer, and some round woven straw baskets. As she rises from her kneeling position the young woman's face tilts upward to look at a bearded soldier at the right of this abundance.

The soldier wears Roman-style armor—a molded cuirass with lappets over chain mail, calf-high sandals, and a striking helmet. With a red mantle around his right shoulder, he also wears a short sword, the hilt of which is the head of a bird of prey, and he carries in his left hand a lance with a red tassel lavishly decorated with gold. He leans forward and extends his open right hand, palm up, toward the young woman.

Behind the soldier are two young pages dressed in velvet with jeweled neckbands. Beside them stands an overweight and underdressed young man who holds in his right hand the leash of a leaping, snarling, liver-and-white spaniel. Farther back are several soldiers, some old, some young, in a variety of armor. Some wear crested helmets and others are bareheaded. One man has climbed a tree and leans out to look at the scene below.

A similar array of figures attends the central woman. Her retinue includes two young women richly dressed in green, their hair and bodices bedecked with jewels. Behind them are three burly men burdened with baskets and a large bronze jug decorated in relief with the head of a man. The foliage and trunk of a large tree crowds the area behind them.

In the background a path winds down a steep hill on the left to a valley where stand three camels and three donkeys with their attendants. Streaks of pink and orange in the sky indicate a sunset in the far distance, but the light on the central scene comes from some unindicated source on the left.

In 1964 Horst Gerson identified the subject of the painting as David and Abigail, relating it to a similar painting which had been sold in The Hague in 1943. Gerson indicated that The Hague work was "very probably by Theodore Rombouts" and the Florida State University painting "by the same hand or workshop."[1]

Theodore Rombouts was born in Antwerp in 1597 and except for time spent in Italy early in his painting career, he lived in that city until his death in 1637. His teachers were Frans Lanckvelt and Abraham Janssens, and his early work was Caravaggesque; later in his life, he painted in a style similar to that of Rubens. Erik Larsen suggests that the reason for this change was Rombouts' selection to participate in the decorations, planned by Rubens, for the 1635 Triumphal Entry of Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand into Antwerp.[2] Julius Held states that Rombouts painted the main picture of one of the large stages for the Entry, one featuring the Temple of Janus.[3] The artists worked from Rubens' sketches and were undoubtedly familiar with all the designs for the Entry.

The biblical scene of the painting is the story of David and Abigail found in the First Book of Samuel, Chapter 25, verses 2 through 42. David, with an army of six hundred men, was in the wilderness of Paran avoiding the wrath of Saul. He heard that the rich man, Nabal, was in Carmel shearing his three thousand sheep. David sent a delegation to Nabal asking for food for a feast day. Nabal churlishly refused to give them anything. David, angered, armed his men and prepared to march on Nabal. Nabal's wife, Abigail, a virtuous and beautiful woman, heard about the incident from a servant who told her, "Now therefore, know and consider what you will do, for harm is determined against our master and against all his household. For he [Nabal] is such a scoundrel that one cannot speak to him [verse 17]." Abigail hastily prepared food—two hundred loaves of bread, two skins of wine, five dressed sheep, and supplies of grain, raisins, and figs. Abigail met David, dismounted, bowed before him and apologized for Nabal. She pled with David to spare her household. David received her gifts and thanked her for keeping him from bloodshed. When Abigail returned home, Nabal, who had been feasting, was drunk; she waited until morning to tell him what had happened and "his heart died within him and he became like a stone. Then it came about after ten days that the Lord struck Nabal and he died [verse 37-38]." When David heard that Nabal was dead, he thanked the Lord for "turning the wickedness of Nabal on his own head [verse 39]." He sent his servants to Abigail and proposed to her. Abigail accepted David's proposal and became his wife.

The meeting of David and Abigail was a popular subject in Baroque art.[4] It provided an opportunity for the artist to portray a rich still life, costumed figures of a bygone time, and a tender love story. The subject lends itself to various interpretations. Abigail has been viewed as a prefiguration of Mary and as the epitome of womanly beauty and virtue.

Theologically, the point of the story is that the actions of Abigail prevented David from a vengeful massacre; romantically, however, it can be read as a story of the deliverance of a good and beautiful woman from a man "harsh and evil in his doings."[5]

If, as Larsen argues, Rombouts changed his style from Caravaggesque to Rubenesque at the time of the ceremonial entry of Ferdinand into Antwerp in 1635, this *David and Abigail* must be dated 1635 or later. It is illuminating to compare the painting with a work on the same subject by Rubens, who painted it three times. The version used for this comparison is an oil sketch dated approximately 1630 from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California (Figure 2).[6] The two paintings are similar in composition. David with his soldiers is on the right, Abigail with her entourage on the left. Abigail gestures toward her offerings while David bends toward her. The two Davids are similarly attired. Rubens' David wears a molded cuirass over a tunic. A red mantle is fastened at his left shoulder and back waist and he wears a short sword on his left side. Howard Rodee explains the anachronisms in Rubens' portrayal of armor, specifically pointing to his "mistake" in adding chain mail to otherwise Roman armor.[7] Since Rombouts has made this same "mistake," it seems likely that he was familiar with this work. However, Rombouts has included three elements not found in Rubens' work: the design of David's helmet, the decorated ewer among Abigail's gifts, and the dog.

The swan emblem on David's helmet is so striking that it immediately captures the viewer's attention (Figure 3). Rubens' David, on the other hand, wears no helmet. A page standing behind him holds a helmet with a small plain crest. In the Rubens work all David's men wear helmets, some of which sport large crests or plumes, but the swan helmet is unique to Rombouts' David.

Prior to its identification as a depiction of the biblical story of David and Abigail, Rombouts' painting was known as *The Knight of the Swan.* In fact, a Rhine River legend supplies an explanation for the inclusion of this emblem in the painting.[8] According to the legend, the young Countess of Cleve was being held prisoner in her own castle by a vassal who insisted that she marry him to regain her freedom. She prayed for deliverance and rang a silver bell which she wore on her chaplet. Far down the Rhine it was heard by a king who viewed it as an opportunity for his son to make his reputation as a brave and noble knight. A swan appeared on the river drawing behind it a boat on a golden chain. The would-be knight boarded the boat, and as he slept the boat was drawn up the Rhine by the swan. The countess saw him and recalled that she had been told by an old nun that a sleeping youth would one day rescue her from imminent danger. She called to the prince and he came to her at once. After she had explained her predicament, he challenged her jailer to mortal combat, triumphed over his more powerful opponent, and was rewarded with the hand of the countess.

Through his portrayal of an anomalous detail, the swan on David's helmet, the artist has implied a connection between the well-known Rhine River legend and David and Abigail; he has presented the viewer with a second story of deliverance, another female freed from an unwelcome restraining force.

The second element of difference between Rubens' and Rombouts' paintings is found in the large lusterware ewer which is prominent among the offerings of Abigail in Rombouts' painting. The ewer, its handle a nude female figure, is decorated with a scene of the sea showing Neptune with his trident and a beautiful young woman with long hair (Figure 4). The narrative in First Samuel says that Abigail took wine to David and his men, but indicated that it was contained in skins, which would be a logical way to carry wine that was being packed on donkeys to a military encampment. Why would Abigail, a pious and God-fearing woman, own such a vessel portraying Neptune, one of the pagan gods? Rubens' work pictures only the baskets of loaves brought by Abigail.

Ancient mythology provides a key to the inclusion of this unlikely container in Abigail's offerings.[9] Three river gods, mediating a dispute between Neptune and Hera concerning dominion over Argos (or Argolis), decided in favor of Hera. In retaliation, Neptune caused those three rivers to dry up, thus parching the whole country. King Danaus sent his fifty daughters out searching for water. One of them, Amymone, was captured by a satyr. She called for help and Neptune came to her rescue, casting his trident in the process. Drawing the trident from the rock in which it had lodged, Neptune created a spring, named for Amymone, which relieved the drought of the country. Here, through this partially depicted story, the artist has represented for the viewer a third tale of the rescue and deliverance of a worthy female from unwelcome restraints, a deliverance that resulted in relief for a country suffering from severe deprivation.

The meeting of David and Abigail is a biblical subject and is portrayed as such in Rubens' work. However, Rombouts, through his inclusion of extremely unusual iconographic elements, has moved his painting from the category of history to the realm of allegory—the theme of which is deliverance. Three heroes—David, the Swan-Knight, and Neptune—are directly or indirectly the agents for the deliverance of three worthy females—Abigail, the Countess of Cleve, and Amymone. Such a reading of the painting seems evident enough, but taking the analysis a step further one may investigate the possibility of a connection between this allegorical theme of deliverance and contemporary events in the history of the Spanish Netherlands. The theme seems particularly appropriate to the city of Antwerp.

Antwerp in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries had been one of the leading cities of northern Europe, a great center of trade and commerce with a very busy port.[10] Ocean-going vessels reached this port by sailing up the Scheldt River. Following the recapture of Antwerp after the revolt of the Netherlands from Spanish dominion, the mouth of the Scheldt was blockaded by Dutch privateers, the Sea Beggars, from the now independent Northern Provinces. Antwerp's trade had thus been diverted to northern cities such as Amsterdam. Many people fled the city, emigrating to cities in the Northern Provinces or across the Rhine to Germany.

The decline of Antwerp was a most important and much discussed issue. Rubens commented on it in a letter to Pierre Dupuy, a Frenchman who was Keeper of the King's Library: "This city, at least, languishes like a consumptive body, declining little by little. Every day sees a decrease in the number of inhabitants, for these unhappy people have no means of supporting themselves either by industrial skill or by trade."[11] Ruth Saunders Magurn, editor and translator of Rubens' letters, comments: "One of Rubens' sincerest aims in his diplomatic career was to bring back the benefits of peace to his own city."[12]

The chief means of bringing back prosperity was the reopening of the Scheldt. This was discussed in every instance of negotiations between Spain and the Northern Provinces—in 1609 when negotiating the Twelve Years' Truce, in 1621 in trying to extend the truce, and in the peace talks of 1632.[13]

As a corollary to this political and economic situation, a tradition was established of expressing this hope for renewed prosperity in works of art. John Rupert Martin noted that the importance of the Scheldt River to the economic life of Antwerp was a common theme in art and pageantry.[14] As early as 1549—as part of the ceremonial entry of Prince Philip—Mercury, as the god of commerce, was shown with Scaldis, the personification of the Scheldt. In 1609 the city of Antwerp commissioned a painting of *Antwerp and the Scheldt* by Abraham Janssens, Rombouts' teacher, for the Statenkamer of the Town Hall. Antwerp is personified as a beautiful young woman crowned by the pentagonal citadel which defended the harbor of the city. The river god in the foreground represents the Scheldt and the still life illustrates the bounty of the city. The purpose of this allegorical subject was to demonstrate that Antwerp's prosperity depended on the commerce of the river at a moment "when the signing of the Twelve Years' Truce seemed to justify the hope that the Scheldt would be reopened."[15]

In 1635 the arrival from Spain of the new governor of the Southern Netherlands, the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand, occasioned new hope for negotiations. A triumphal procession through the city of Antwerp, postponed from January because of bad weather, was arranged for April 17, 1635, and Peter Paul Rubens was responsible for planning and designing the elaborate displays along the parade route. There were to be four stages (temporary façades attached to buildings along the route) and five triumphal arches. The first stage along the processional route portrayed the welcome of the new governor. Three large paintings decorated this construction. One pictured Neptune calming the sea for Ferdinand's voyage (Figure 5).[16] This Neptune is so similar to the Neptune on Abigail's ewer (Figure 4) that we must assume that they had a common source or that Rombouts derived his figure from Rubens' painting. A second scene from this stage pictured Ferdinand meeting his cousin, Ferdinand of Hungary at Nordlingen. The central painting showed the Cardinal-Infante riding into the city and being welcomed by Antwerp, a beautiful young woman rising from a kneeling position, extending her hands in welcome to the new governor (Figure 6).[17] Antwerp's crown is the citadel which defends the harbor and above her head floats the escutcheon of the city. This personification of Antwerp is similar in face, figure, posture and gesture to Rombouts' Abigail, raising the possibility that it, too, like the Neptune, could have been used as a source by Rombouts. Another of the stages along the route was designed by Rubens to illustrate the city's impoverishment.[18] In this stage, *Mercury Deserting Antwerp* (Figure 7),[19] the departing Mercury signifies commerce, Scaldis (the river) appears at lower left in chains, Antwerp, a beautiful young woman with the citadel crown, kneels as if making an appeal, and a ship with furled sails in the harbor indicates the absence of trade. In allegorical guise, this was an appeal to the new governor to provide a remedy for the ills of the city.

Rombouts' *David and Abigail* reads as a similar allegorical appeal. Antwerp, in the welcoming, pleading posture of Abigail, begs for deliverance from the economic bondage of the Dutch blockade of the Scheldt River. She points to the riches—the still life—that could result from the deliverance, the wealth and abundance that once accrued to Antwerp through commerce and trade and could again if action were taken against the Dutch privateers.

In a concluding example, a seventeenth-century tapestry presents another version of this scene differing from the painting in the position of the ewer and the posture of the dog (Figure 8). In the tapestry the ewer is behind other offerings of Abigail and the dog's head is turned away from the viewer. Because the scenes are otherwise so similar, the allegorical nature of Rombouts' elements is emphasized. The painting shows the dog straining against its leash and snarling with bared fangs. A possible reading logically suggests that the animal represents a threat of action against the Dutch privateers, the enemy of Antwerp's prosperity.

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1 From a letter by H. W. Janson dated September 23, 1964, in the files of the Florida State University Gallery and Museum.

2 Erik Larsen, *Seventeenth Century Flemish Painting* (Freren: Luca Verlag, 1985) 254-55.

3 Julius S. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens: A Critical Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980) vol. I, 240.

4 Andor Pigler, *Barockthemen: eine Auswahl von Verzeichnissen zur Ikonographie des 17. und 18. Jahrhundert* (Budapest: Akademiai Kiado, 1974) Bd. I lists four pages of depictions of Abigail before David—145-148.

5 *The Bible*, First Samuel, Chapter 25, verse 3.

6 Figure 2 is courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, California. Held, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens* illustrates the sketch this painting is based upon; a slightly different version is in the Detroit Art Institute. For a comparison of these three works see Michael Jaffe, "Rubens' 'David and Abigail'," *Burlington Magazine* 114 December, 1972, 863-864.

7 Howard D. Rodee, "Rubens' Treatment of Antique Armor," *Art Bulletin* XLIX 3 September, 1967.

8 Clara Erskine Clement, *A Handbook of Legendary and Mythological Art* (Detroit: Gale Research Company, 1969) 351-352.

9 *New Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* Translated by Richard Aldington and Delano Ames (London: Prometheus Press, 1968) 133-135 tells this story in detail. Edward Tripp, *Crowell's Handbook of Classical Mythology* (New York: Crowell, 1970) 47-48 lists as sources for this myth Apollodorus 2.1.4; Hyginus, *Fabulae*, 149A. Robert Bell, *Dictionary of Classical Mythology* (Oxford, Santa Barbara: ABC Clio Inc. 1982) 260-261 lists as sources Lucian *Dei Marini* 6; Pausanias 2.37.1.

10 Historical background is taken from Leon van der Essen, *A Short History of Belgium* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1920); George Edmundson, *History of Holland* (Cambridge: University Press, 1922); J. A. van Houtte, *An Economic History of the Low Countries 800-1800* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977); and Jonathan I. Israel, *The Dutch Republic and the Hispanic World 1601-1661* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982).

11 Peter Paul Rubens, *The Letters of Peter Paul Rubens*, Translated and edited by Ruth Saunders Magurn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955) 184.

12 Rubens 474.

13 Israel 15 ff. and 74 ff.

14 John Rupert Martin, *The Decorations for the Pompa Introitus Ferdinandi, Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard XLI*, (London: Phaidon Press, 1972) 186.

15 Martin 186.

16 Figure 5 is taken from *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens* by Julius Held (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

17 Figure 6 is taken from *Peter Paul Rubens The Magnificent Ceremonial Entry Into Antwerp of His Royal Highness Ferdinand of Austria*, (New York: Benjamin Blom, Inc., 1971).

18 Martin 183.

19 See note 17 above for source of Figure 7.

Figure 2. *David Meeting Abigail,* Peter Paul Rubens, The J. Paul Getty Museum.

Figure 3. Detail of David's helmet, *David and Abigail,* Florida State University Fine Arts Gallery and Museum.

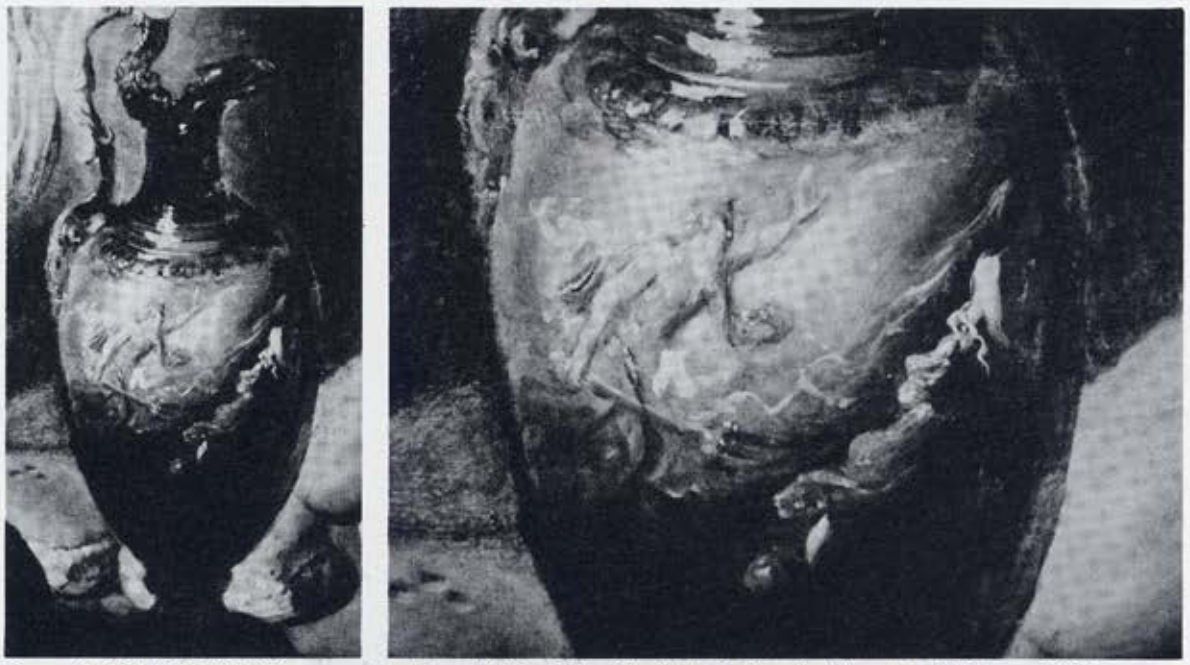

Figure 4. Detail of Abigail's ewer, *David and Abigail,* Florida State University Fine Arts Gallery and Museum.

Figure 5. *Neptune Calming the Seas,* Peter Paul Rubens, *The Oil Sketches of Peter Paul Rubens,* Julius Held, Princeton University Press.

Figure 6. *Antwerp Welcoming Ferdinand,* from *Peter Paul Rubens The Magnificent Ceremonial Entry Into Antwerp of His Royal Highness Ferdinand of Austria,* Benjamin Blom, Inc., New York.

Figure 7. *Mercury Deserting Antwerp,* from *Peter Paul Rubens The Magnificent Ceremonial Entry Into Antwerp of His Royal Highness Ferdinand of Austria,* Benjamin Blom, Inc., New York.

Figure 8. *A Book of Tapestries,* Plate 51, W. B. Forman, Spring Books, London.