**Rubens (1577-1640), Self-portrait, ca. 1604**

**Oil paint on paper**

**Long-term loan, private collection**

The new self-portrait is the earliest known individual self-portrait of Rubens. It is a preparatory study for a self-portrait that he added to his most important assignment at the court of the Gonzaga in Mantua: the decoration of the capella maggiore of the Jesuit church in the northern Italian city.

*The young Rubens’ calling card*

Although Rubens became a court painter to the Gonzagas quickly after his arrival in Italy, it took another four years before he got a really big job. In 1604-1605, he painted three immense paintings for the Jesuit church: The Gonzaga Family in Adoration of the Holy Trinity, The Baptism of Christ in the Jordan and The Transfiguration. Rubens was so honoured to be given the commission that he gave himself a place in the central representation depicting The Gonzaga Family in Adoration of the Holy Trinity. By including his own image, Rubens immortalised himself as the painter. This ‘visual signature’ is the first calling card of young Rubens.

In the early nineteenth century, the works were removed from the church by Napoleon’s troops. Today they are spread between several European museums. The large central canvas has also been cut up, and has only been preserved in badly damaged fragments. Rubens’ Self-Portrait was lost as well. The preliminary study, however, has been preserved, and is now the fifth known individual self-portrait of Rubens, and the second in the Rubens House's permanent exhibition. The preparatory self-portrait resurfaced only recently and – after controversy in the past – was attributed to Rubens by Ben van Beneden and Arnout Balis.

*Rediscovery*

In 1977 – 400 years after the painter’s birth – the hitherto unknown work was published by the renowned art historian Michael Jaffé (1923-1997), one of the greatest Rubens experts of the last century. However, his discovery received little approbation from other Rubens specialists, although this may also have been related to Jaffé's striking personality. Art historians are not immune to rivalry and envy. The self-portrait was on loan to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge for some time, where Jaffé was director from 1973 to 1990. Then it disappeared. It only reappeared four decades later.

The work looks like a finished self-portrait, but is in fact a study; Rubens often made them as preparation for his great history works. The artist made them during his stay in Italy and about ten years after his return to Antwerp, but no longer after that. These self-portraits served to develop a face that required more attention, or to capture a particular head – a ‘characteristic head’ – or a facial expression that might one day be used for a painting.

As early as 1981, Rubens specialist Elizabeth McGrath suggested that the work was probably a preparatory study for a self-portrait that Rubens added to a painting for the cappella maggiore of the Santissima Trinità, the Jesuit church in Mantua. In 1604-1605, Rubens was commissioned by the Duke of Gonzaga to paint three gigantic, elongated canvases to decorate the walls of the chancel of the Jesuit church. The Gonzaga family in adoration of the Holy Trinity could be seen above the main altar, while the laterali were lined left and right with New Testament scenes in which the Trinity reveals itself: the Baptism of Christ (now in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts in Antwerp) and the Transfiguration (now in the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Nancy).

In the central representation (now in the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua) the entire Gonzaga family is depicted in adoration of the Trinity. (In the upper zone of the composition, in heaven, angels unfurl a carpet on which the Trinity is depicted.) Unfortunately, this painting has only been preserved in fragments. In the original composition, the family was flanked by halberdiers who acted as a guard of honour. It was between the halberdiers on the right that Rubens had also portrayed himself. Standing discreetly among the peripheral witnesses of the religious drama, he discreetly observed the viewers of his painting. During the Napoleonic occupation of Mantua in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the painting was damaged and cut up; various figures and other details were cut out to be sold separately. Rubens’ portrait was also lost at that time. Fortunately, the modello for it was preserved.

It was, incidentally, not uncommon for Rubens to include himself in a painting. Great masters such as the brothers Van Eyck, Dürer and Rafaël had done this before him. By adding his portrait, the artist became a privileged witness to the event and immortalised himself as the painter. In addition, he emphasised his position, as well as his professional and artistic aspirations.

Later, artists continued to portray themselves among the crowd. When Rubens reworked his Adoration of the Magi (Museo del Prado, Madrid) twenty years earlier in Madrid in 1628, he gave one of the added horsemen his own features. A few years later, Velázquez, who had got to know Rubens’ painting in Madrid up close, added himself as a secondary character in The surrender of Breda (Museo del Prado, Madrid).