

KLAAS MULLER

P E T E R P A U L R U B E N S

Bearded old man, looking down to his left

This powerfully painted head study shows a bald, bearded old man, his head slightly bowed and his gaze lowered. Rubens captures the moment with astonishing spontaneity and accuracy. Impasto accents on the nose and skull contrast with transparent brushwork elsewhere, making the face seem to glow out of the darkness.

Surprisingly, the work is painted on a reused sheet of paper. When turned over, the silhouette of a woman's head appears, partly visible through the model's beard. This visual echo adds an unexpected layer to the work and bears witness to Rubens' playful approach to materials and composition.

The study is not merely an exercise: Rubens used this characterful head several times in his oeuvre. It appears as St. Amand(us) in The Elevation of the Cross (Antwerp, Cathedral of Our Lady), St. Thomas in the so-called Apostolado Lerma (Madrid, Museo del Prado), and even as Melchior in The Adoration of the Magi (Madrid, Museo del Prado). The face also appears in The Incredulity of St. Thomas and The Tribute Money, each time in a different role.

Spontaneous, ad vivum head studies such as this served as a visual storehouse for his larger compositions. They reveal his fascination with character, light and expression, as well as his ability to achieve maximum expressiveness with minimal means.

We are grateful to Ben van Beneden for identifying this work as an authentic Rubens

oil on paper glued on panel, 56.3 x 45.8 cm

