Jacques Jordaens
Antwerp 19 May 1593 - 18 October 1678

Hermes at Calypso’s Table
Oil on canvas
45 3/4 x 60 5/8 in. 116.2 x 154 cm.

Provenance:
In the possession of a noble Italian family since the early 19th century;
Carlo Graf von Rex, Florence;
SOLD Christie’s, London, 9 July 2015, lot 57.*

*The positive identification of the vendor family provenance has been withheld by Messrs. Christie’s on the grounds of ‘client confidentiality’. Graf von Rex has stated (Ms. communication) that ‘the painting was sold in an 1820s neoclassical Italian frame. I (Graves in 1820s frame) have given an undertaking that the full identity of the family concerned shall be revealed under client confidentiality to the eventual purchaser’s legal advisor.’
Towards the end of her supremacy in the affairs of the duchy of Savoy, the Duchess Maria Giovanna Battista of Savoy, Nemours (1644-1724), widow of Duke Carlo Emmanuele II (1634-1675), commissioned a form of dramatic opera, La Ramira, to celebrate the forthcoming marriage of her son to the Infanta of Portugal. In the event, the marriage did not take place and the opera was never performed, but it is of interest in that it dramatised the Duchess’ account of the reason for the long-drawn-out delay in her marriage to the Duke in 1665. The culprit was the Duke’s mother whose opposition to the marriage was such that it only took place after her death. The young couple had celebrated the event by commissioning Alcesti O sia L’Amore Sincero whose heroine was a paragon of conjugal love and self-sacrifice, and also by acquiring two sets of tapestries designed by Jordaens, one of which was the Story of Odysseus, the illustrious hero traditionally revered above all for his devotion to his wife Penelope.

For the couple, Odysseus, whose adventures on his journey home after the conquest of Troy were recounted by Homer in his venerated and well known eponymous epic, would have been emblematic of patience and steadfast love. The vicissitudes suffered by the Greek ruler of Ithaca thus would have struck a sympathetic chord as they recalled the obstacles that had been placed in the way of their own marriage. Of the several sets of tapestry illustrating the Odyssey then likely to have been available, the newly-weds chose the series of seven designed by the leading artist of Antwerp at that time, Jacques Jordaens (1591-1678). In order to proclaim their ownership of the set, they had woven into the borders the Duke’s coat-of-arms and his consort’s initials at the centre top and bottom of the borders. The set, echoing the history of the House of Savoy itself, is now called Odysseus’s fate, ordained by Zeus, is tensely settled by his messenger, Hermes, and the beautiful but inscrutable goddess Calypso, who had kept the hero in her thrall.

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The opening scene of the series, Hermes at Calypso’s Table, 4 Jordaens’ painting of which is the subject of this essay (Plate 1 p. 16), is also in Rome. 5 Here Jordaens, with a story-teller’s instinct and confident assurance in the rendering of every detail, depicts the idyllic setting in which Odysseus’s fate, ordained by Zeus, is tensely settled by his messenger, Hermes, and the beautiful but inscrutable goddess Calypso, who had kept the hero in her thrall.

By the year 1666 when the tapestries were bought, Jordaens had been working in Antwerp for just over fifty years. Indeed, in that year he is recorded as enrolling an apprentice - his sixteenth - in the records of the Antwerp guild of St Luke. 3 Three years later, when he was in his mid-seventies, we learn that he was still ‘painting diligently’. 4 Jordaens had acquired a large property in the centre of Antwerp and was prosperous as a result of both his parental inheritance and his highly successful career as a painter; indeed he has long been recognised as the third great artist active in 17th century Antwerp.

In terms of international repute, he has had to cede to two other Antwerp artists, Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), whose geniuses were honoured and recognised all over Europe in their lifetimes. As one mark of their contemporary reputations both Rubens and Van Dyck were knighted by King Charles of Great Britain, and if Van Dyck came nowhere near emulating Rubens’ wide and deep learning and political expertise, he was more immediately influential in the art of portraiture. Indeed, successful as he was, Jordaens could not lay claim to any extraneous, intellectual accomplishment or artistic issue or school. He and his art stand alone.

His oeuvre is large, due to his longevity, fertile imagination and the speedy, fluent technique which gave expression to it. The catalogue raisonné of his drawings, published over forty years ago by Roger D’Hulst (1917-1996), the leading authority on Jordaens of his generation, amounts to some four hundred items. No equivalent publication has been compiled of his paintings and nor has an attempt been made to offer a comprehensive survey since the early 20th century, but a catalogue raisonné would be likely to contain some seven to eight hundred items.

In viewing his production as a whole, one is struck by the artist’s versatility. Primarily a figure painter, he was at ease with every type of subject currently popular except seascape. Notwithstanding, one of his most famous paintings, now in Copenhagen, depicts the departure of a ferry from a city quay (its ostensible subject

2. Ibid. p. 175 under ‘1665 Tesoro Emmanuele’.
4. Oil on canvas, 116.2 x 154 cm. Provenance: in possession of a family since the early 19th century; sold for that family by Christie’s, London, 9 July 2015, lot 17.
6. This was noted by the Hamburg painter Matthias Scheits (1625/30-1700) on the flyleaf of his copy of Carel van Mander’s Schilder-Boeck, which was discovered by Wilhelm Bode. See M. Rooses, Jordaens, 1908, pp. 241-242 and D’Hulst et al., ‘Exh. Cat.’ Jacob Jordaens (1593-1678) (Antwerp, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1995), 1993, p. 19.
being St Peter finding the tribute money). He also eschewed battle scenes, except for his early design of a tapestry which showed Alexander at the battle of Issus. Otherwise he mastered genres which painters of more concentrated vision made their specialities, for instance animal painting, still life and landscape, but these were always subsidiary elements in his figure compositions, which were drawn from a wide range of biblical, classical and proverbial sources. Jordaens comes across as generous-minded, exuberant and inventive, although, at times to modern sensibilities - he was not alone in occasionally pointing up crude ideas or motifs.

The published facts about the artist’s life show him dedicated to the pursuit of his profession and never diverted - like Rubens - by scholarly pursuits or civic duty. There are records concerning his taking in apprentices, of property disputes with his neighbours, of one or two lawsuits concerning works of art and of journeys to the Protestant Northern Netherlands. But we know little about his friendships, intellectual interests, extensive study of architecture or even his collections. Concerning the latter we know of a sale of his possessions soon after his death, but not much about its contents; however we do have information on the remnants of his estate from the catalogue of the 1734 sale by his descendants. Concerning his interests in architecture, we have the magnificent façade of his house in Antwerp dated 1641, and the richly detailed backdrops of buildings which often embellished his work. Evidence of his intellectual pursuits is only provided by his art, which shows him to have been an inspired student of classical literature and a sympathetic and enthusiastic interpreter of Netherlandish folklore.

Although in 1659 a city tax survey, calculated on the basis of the number of hearths or fireplaces in a property, placed Jordaens among the four hundred wealthiest citizens of Antwerp, there is some evidence that points to a degree of social isolation on his part. True, we know of visitors to his studio and appreciate hearsay of his enjoying company with wine of an evening, but he was only asked once in his long life to stand as a godparent and once to act as a witness to a marriage. To this indicator of a restricted social milieu can perhaps be associated the record of a darker happening in late July 1642, when two days later with her husband and others threatened her again with a knife as she sat outside her house. Possibly this unpleasant abuse in the Hoogstraat was provoked by differences of religious faith. Among his early works is his group portrait of himself playing music with the family of his teacher, Adam van Noort, whose daughter he married very soon after he became a master in the Antwerp Guild of St Luke in 1615/1616. The group portrait shows Jordaens treating himself as very much one of the van Noort family, following Jordaens' mother-in-law's death, his former teacher moved in to live in the Jordans household. Van Noort had earlier been registered as a Lutheran. So it is clear that his milieu was Protestant and this in a Catholic country where Protestant worship was to be penalised. Jordaens himself was brought up a Catholic and his marriage to Catharina van Noort was solemnised in Antwerp Cathedral. Yet she seems to have adhered to her father's profession of faith and was to be buried in the Protestant cemetery at Putte, not far from Antwerp over the border in the Dutch Republic. It is likely that both she and her father influenced Jordaens who, nine years before his death, was first openly accused of being Protestant. With increasing age he became more open about his faith, for communion according to the Calvinist rite was for the first time recorded as celebrated in his house in 1675. He too was to be buried at Putte.

However if the van Noort/Jordaens religious affiliation set the family socially apart from the majority in Catholic Antwerp society, it can hardly be said to have had an injurious effect on the artist's professional career, except perhaps in respect to the relative paucity of ecclesiastic commissions and in so far as he was not called on to work for or sought after by the Catholic/Habsburg élite in Brussels. The Court there was to prefer the art and services of David Teniers the Younger. The latter’s work contrasted sharply with that of Jordaens: he concentrated on the everyday and the anecdotal - usually on a small scale - rather than on the great religious and mythological themes of history painting. In fact the two great Habsburg collectors during Jordaens’ career, King Philip IV of Spain...
24 25

(1605–1665), sovereign of the Spanish Netherlands, and the Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm during his tenure of the governorship of the region (1647–1656), hardly patronised him. Philip IV might have known of his work, but only as an assistant or associate of Rubens. For Jordaens was one of a number of Antwerp figure painters who worked up Rubens’ designs for paintings to decorate the royal hunting lodge outside Madrid in the 1630s, and then was considered sufficiently gifted to be called upon by Rubens’ executors to complete two mythological scenes destined to decorate the Alcázar in Madrid, which had been left unfinished by Rubens at his death.

In fact a painting actually designed and executed by Jordaens had been acquired by the king, but under the misapprehension that it was by Rubens. This misattribution was probably made because Jordaens chose as his setting for the *Love of Cupid and Psyche* the façade and garden temple that stood prominently in Rubens’ property on the Wapper in Antwerp. The Archduke Leopold-Wilhelm, en poste in the Southern Netherlands during Jordaens’ maturity, had a policy of making an encyclopaedic collection of contemporary painting in the region. He bought only one work by Jordaens, but admittedly it was his most ambitious rendering of a favourite theme, *The King Drinks* (Fig. 1).

14. Jordaens was contracted to execute the *Cadmus and Minerva* (oil on canvas, 181 x 300 cm), *Fall of the Giants* (oil on canvas, 171 x 285 cm), *Judgement of Midas* (oil on canvas, 180 x 270 cm) and *Marriage of Peleus and Thetis* (oil on canvas, 181 x 288 cm). Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. nos. P01713, P01539, P01551 and P01634. For more information on the commission of the Torre de la Parada, see S. Alpers, *The Decoration of the Torre de la Parada* (Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard, IX), 1971.

15. The two pictures were *Andromeda Liberated by Perseus* (oil on canvas, 267 x 162 cm), now in the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid (inv. no. P01663), and *Hercules and Antaeus* (oil on canvas, 215 x 145 cm), private collection, see F. Healy in E. McGrath ed., *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. Mythological Subjects*, I, vol.1, Turnhout, 2013, *Achilles to the Graces*, I, p. 242, and n.17, p. 246 under no. 14, fig.155.


17. Oil on canvas, 131 x 127 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. no. P01548.

Fig. 1. Jordaens, *The King Drinks*. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.
applied the vision of the large-scale figure painter to the popular culture of the Netherlands, first tapped as a fruitful source of subject matter by Pieter Brueghel the Elder in the previous century, and given further life by Adriaen Brouwer (1605–1638) and on occasion by Rubens himself.

Although Jordaens never received official recognition from the Habsburg court in Brussels, he was patronised by Protestant rulers in Northern Europe. The commission, awarded indirectly from King Charles I, to execute the cycle of the Story of Psyche to decorate Greenwich Palace in 1640-41, perhaps on the grounds that his charges would be less than those of Rubens, came to nothing because of the death of the intermediary in Antwerp and then the political crisis in England. Jordaens, as far as is known, was only paid for the first of the twenty-two canvases in the planned cycle. By the end of the decade, the artist’s renown had spread yet farther as he was to be approached by the King of Denmark and the Queen of Sweden. Of greater moment were the first contacts initiated towards the end of 1649 for the house of Orange that would lead to the greatest challenge of his career, the design and execution of the Triumph of Prince Frederik Hendrik for the Oranjezaal in the Huis ten Bosch near The Hague (still in situ), which, over seven metres square, was installed for the Dowager Princess of Orange in 1652 (Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2. Jordaens, Triumph of Prince Frederik Hendrik, Huis ten Bosch.](image)

Considering the artist’s great fluency with the brush and his creative facility - he was said to have executed a Pan and Syrinx, perhaps the near life-size rendering in Brussels, in six days - remarkably little is known about his everyday patrons and admirers. Apart from Leopold-Wilhelm’s The King Drinks, of the two other early owners of versions - almost ten paintings of the subject being known today - one was Jordaens’ sister, who died in 1668. Her brother’s painting was the chimneypiece in the Neermamer aan den Hof in her house, Het Zwaard, near the Antwerp tapestry entrepôt. The second was likely to have been Arnold Lunden, a high-ranking Antwerp city official married to the sister of Rubens’ second wife, whose important collection was valued in 1643/44 (the list is known by a later transcript). In fact Rubens himself was unusual among the many Antwerp owners of art collections whose inventories have been published, in that he owned as many as three paintings by Jordaens. These were offered for sale after the artist’s death in 1640; one was Odysseus in the Cave of Polyphemus (Fig. 3), which was likely to have been executed as part of the same project as the Hermes at Calypso’s Table.
As much if not more is known about the sale of tapestries designed by Jordaens during his lifetime than the commerce in his paintings. The clientele would have been very different as the production of tapestry catered chiefly for the aristocracy, the extensive wall space of whose grand rooms required decorative covering; the urban patriciate seemed to have concentrated more on the acquisition of paintings as is borne out by the popular Antwerp genre of the *kunstkamer* or gallery interior, which rarely if ever depicted tapestry. And while the aristocracy amassed both art forms, the rich bourgeoisie, on the whole, confined themselves to pictures.

Of course there was a great tradition in the Southern Netherlands of weaving tapestries, and in Brussels in particular where the tapestry industry was the largest employer, even after the religious persecutions from about the middle of the 16th century. The emigration of Protestant weavers saw the establishment of other centres of production, for instance in Paris and Delft and later Mortlake, but Brussels, during most of Jordaens’ career, remained pre-eminent: witness the speedy weaving in c. 1626 by four workshops of Rubens’ designs for the eight thousand square-metre *Triumph of the Eucharist* for the Governor of the Netherlands, the Archduchess Isabella Clara Eugenia, as a present to the monastery of the *Descalzas Reales* in Madrid (and still in situ). 25 Jordaens would have been aware not only of the great tradition of tapestry production, but more particularly of Rubens’ contribution to it when he was first approached to supply designs by a proprietor of a tapestry workshop or a tapestry dealer such as Daniel Fourment, the father of Rubens’ second wife.

Our knowledge of the workings of the Brussels tapestry industry is hampered by the destruction of the Brussels municipal archives by the French bombardment of the city in 1695. Furthermore, facts concerning the interaction between the rich and powerful weavers of Brussels, with their particular craft tradition and rules concerning the practice of weaving and the maintenance of standards of excellence, and the artists commissioned to provide designs, seem not to have been the subject of any recent scholarly study, at least insofar as this period is concerned. This is partly because by tradition the history of painting and drawing has been treated separately from that of tapestry. Thus if the economics of the tapestry business itself remain to be clarified, so does the attraction for artists in participating in it. Certainly if the example of earlier generations of Flemish artists is taken into account, the rewards of collaboration in the weaving industry must have been significant. How early that was a career consideration for Jordaens is a matter of speculation.

There are several aspects connected with the early years of Jordaens’ career concerning which our lack of knowledge is particularly frustrating. Rubens was about eighteen years older than Jordaens, yet they had both been taught by the long-lived Adam van Noort; the guild records show that he was a popular teacher, but we have little idea of his manner or style. Nor have we any idea whether Jordaens stayed on as his apprentice until he became a master or why the young man should have been listed in the Guild’s main register for 1615/16 as a waterchilder.26 It seems strange that Jordaens was taught this technique, a speciality of nearby Mechelen used in the production of wall hangings, especially when he showed himself early to be extremely able in the handling of oil paint. Exponents of the technique were rare in Antwerp: when Jordaens was enrolled (as one of two) in the 1615/16 guild accounting year only six others had been so registered since 1600.

The handling of water-based pigments was also required for the execution of the heavy paper cartoons, which were cut into narrow strips and placed beneath the looms so as to be readily legible for the tapestry weavers to copy. An early biography of Jordaens credits him in a garbled and muddled way with having executed tapestry cartoons for Rubens, and it remains a possibility that the young Jordaens, having advertised himself as a waterchilder, was employed by Rubens to prepare his designs for the History of Decius Mus, his first venture in the tapestry trade, for the weavers. A contract between the weavers and their client for the tapestry cycle was signed in November 1616. This theory is not necessarily undermined by the fact that another young artist of exceptional ability and six years Jordaens’ junior, Anthony van Dyck, was credited quite early with the execution of the cartoons. In this connection, the authorship of the Decius Mus series owned by the Prince of Liechtenstein has long been debated, but what is clear is that it did not comprise the working cartoons consulted by the weavers at their looms so Jordaens’ execution of it is not at issue. While there is slightly later documentary evidence to establish Van Dyck’s collaboration with Rubens, for Jordaens’ association with the dominant artistic personality of Antwerp there is only the visual testimony provided by his early, but not earliest production, from about 1616, the year of his first extant dated painting.

In 1620, Van Dyck was the only one of Rubens’ assistants to be named in the contract for the Antwerp Jesuit Church commission. The following year, when Van Dyck was still active in the city, Jordaens was appointed (unwillingly, because the duties of the post were time-consuming) Dean of the Guild of St Luke, thus demonstrating the esteem in which he was already held by the patriciate of the city hall.27 Probably in the same year, the artist painted the group portrait of himself and his family now in the Prado in which his daughter, aged about four, stands beside her seated mother (Fig. 4).28 Opposite is the artist, leaning on a fashionable ‘spannered’ chair; in the centre stands their young servant. This masterpiece astonishes by virtue of its size and the imposing self-portrait, which broadcasts the artist’s self-confidence and celebrates the success that had come with his early maturity. The dimensions are slightly larger than an earlier group portrait in St Petersburg in which Jordaens depicted himself with his parents and siblings.29 There the artist also gave himself prominence, but nevertheless he is seated like his parents and three of his elder sisters. Indeed, the later family group betrays an ambition, both social and artistic, that distinguishes it from any self-portrait by his likely mentor Rubens or his younger competitor Van Dyck. Not until the late 1630s, when Rubens portrayed his second wife leaving their town house with her son (Musée du Louvre, Paris) was anything created in Antwerp to rival its pretension, except the over-life-size depictions of the Habsburgs in the huge decorations painted to welcome the Cardinal-Infante Ferdinand to Antwerp in 1635.

In the autumn of 1621 the young Van Dyck, having established his eminence in Antwerp and his promise in London, which he had visited briefly in 1620-21, made the journey south to Italy. Jordaens had not followed the traditional path to Italy, probably not only because of his early marriage but also, given what we believe was his familiarity with Rubens, because the older artist had sufficient artistic resources - a collection of secondary material and of works of art - from which Jordaens could learn and greatly benefit. Indeed, it is in Rubens’ milieu and in his art that it is most fruitful to search for many of the formal idioms of Jordaens’ art.

27. Oil on canvas, 175.2 x 137.5 cm. St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 484.
29. Oil on canvas, 175.2 x 137.5 cm. St Petersburg, The State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. 484.
If one characteristic of Jordaens’ oeuvre is the daring variety and audacity of his compositions, another is his eschewal of any regular attempt to document his work. Perhaps in his eyes the brilliance of his handling and the richness of his colouring were sufficient hallmarks of his authorship, for it was not usual for him to sign or date his paintings. This was an idiosyncrasy he shared with both Rubens and Van Dyck. Whereas with Rubens documented commissions are an abundant and frequent feature of his career, these are rare at least in the early decades of Jordaens’ career. Indeed we know of only three in the period up to 1628. In that year his outstanding merit was recognised with the commission to join Rubens and Van Dyck, who had recently returned from Italy, in painting altarpieces for the church of the Augustinian Fathers in Antwerp. Between this altarpiece of the *Martyrdom of Saint Apollonia* and the earlier *Self-Portrait with his Wife and Child*, he had completed a remarkable series of striking works pulsating with colour and energy like the Copenhagen masterpiece of *Susanna and the Elders* and the *Homage to Ceres* (Fig. 5). Yet for none of these works do we have details of when or for whom it was painted.

Rubens was in his late thirties (coincidentally so was Van Dyck) when he embarked on his first commission for a tapestry series. Recent research suggests that Jordaens was slightly younger when he embarked on what was to prove an enduring and fruitful relationship with the great weavers of Brussels and the tapestry dealers in that city and in Antwerp, where a tapestry ‘pand’ or entrepôt had been founded in 1554. It has recently been claimed that Jordaens contributed more in the 17th century to secular decoration through the medium of tapestry than any other Fleming apart from Rubens. Such a realisation has been slow in coming, for at the beginning of the last century only three sets of tapestry designs were credited to him; that had increased to seven by 1965, while in 2005 a hitherto unknown set came to light. Significantly, a tapestry dealer is recorded as having bought thirty assorted designs or cartoons for tapestries from Jordaens’ estate, of which at least some could have been of his invention. Probably the most successful and famous series he designed was *The Riding School*, inspired by the *Manège Royal*, a copiously illustrated book of 1623; we know of sets being ordered in the 1650s, while another was purchased by the Emperor in 1666. But Jordaens’ design work was probably done much earlier in the 1640s, as was the set of the *Story of Odysseus* ordered by Carlo Emanuele II, Duke of Savoy in the same year, for it had been designed even earlier. Indeed, the *Story of Odysseus* has been regarded as one of Jordaens’ earliest forays into tapestry design and dated on stylistic grounds from the 1630s. This date, due in large part to Roger D’Hulst, has recently been challenged. A set of the *Scenes from Country Life* at Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire, was woven by a leading Brussels tapezier, Jacob Geubels II, who died c.1629, and had probably been ordered by the 2nd Earl of Devonshire who had died the previous year (Fig. 6). If this were indeed the case, it would suggest for reasons of style that most scenes in the *Story of Odysseus* had been designed somewhat earlier. Some forty years before, Emile Duverger was already advocating an early start to Jordaens’ involvement with the tapestry business based on the record made in the 18th century of the date 1620 on a tapestry cartoon attributed to him, a claim no longer verifiable as the cartoon has not survived. He then went on to propose that the set of the *Story of Odysseus*, known to have been ordered from the same Jacob Geubels on behalf of the son of the King of Poland in 1624, should be identified with that by Jordaens with which we are concerned.
The visit to the Southern Netherlands of the cultivated prince (1595-1648), who became Władysław IV Vasa when elected king in 1632, received great publicity; he was much honoured by the Archduchess Isabella, then Governor of the Netherlands, who commissioned Rubens to paint his portrait. But this proposal too must remain hypothetical as no details about the commission are known. More fully documented is the legal dispute that arose following Geubels’s failure to deliver the tapestry set as promised in 1626. There is no record of the set’s existence in Poland and quite possibly it was never completed, let alone delivered. Thus if Duverger’s proposal is put aside, it has to be admitted that like much of Jordaens’ early work, the identity of the patron of the Story of Odysseus—the dealer or weaver who commissioned it—remains unknown; indeed only two sets are extant, one partial and woven by an anonymous shop from the Van der Streekens and Van Leefdael looms and acquired by Carlo Emanuele (Fig. 8). We presume that the commission must have come sometime, perhaps through his growing reputation and his claims as a waterschilder who had perhaps assisted Rubens c. 1625-27 in the preparation of the Decius Mus tapestries. In this respect, too, is relevant the supposed policy of the Archducal couple, Albert and Isabella, after the declaration of the Twelve Years Truce in the war against the United Provinces in 1609, to stimulate the enterprise of the Brussels tapestriers in seeking out new tapestry designers.

In fact the subject settled on for Jordaens was not novel, for it had been well rehearsed in tapestry before: Homer’s Odyssey was the subject of a popular series woven in Brussels and designed by Michiel Coxie (1499-1592). Jan van der Strael, called Stradanus (1523-1605) designed another and, perhaps, the hugely ambitious and spectacular decoration at Fontainebleau of the long destroyed Galerie d’Ulysse by Primaticcio (1504-1570).


Jordaens did not have to read Greek to know the epic, for it had been translated into Dutch in the 1560s. He would be catering for the tastes of a highly educated audience by selecting evocative incidents in the myth, which he could illustrate in a dramatic and comprehensible manner. As it turned out, not all the subjects he chose seem to have been included in the series, for there are adventures concerning Odysseus depicted by Jordaens for which no tapestries are known.

37. Scenes of which no tapestries are extant are Odysseus in the Cave of Polyphemus (see the finished painting reproduced here as Fig. 4) and Odysseus and Nausicaa for which the J. J. Baron Gallery recently had a cartoon 117.5 x 194 cm which is now in a private French collection. For this cartoon see J.-L. Baron, Jacob Jordaens, Odysses, and Naissace, 2012, and K. Nelson, ‘Jacob Jordaens: Designs for Tapestry’, Pictura Nova, V, 1998, nos. 7a-b and 12a-b.
Jordaens, who in one of his earliest paintings had already shown himself to be a precise interpreter of his sources - his unusual and inventive *Apotheosis of Aeneas* (Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst)\(^{38}\) follows Ovid’s account in the *Metamorphoses* - had a whole series of dramatic incidents in the twenty-four books of Homer’s epic to choose from. In the event, scenes from books V, X, XIII and XVII completed the whole process of production from his studio via the weaver’s workshop to the walls of the ducal palace in Turin. Surprisingly, two of these did not involve Odysseus directly. A further five subjects from books VI, IX, X, XIII were sketched and or worked up by Jordaens, but were apparently discarded by the weavers.

38. Oil on canvas, 212.5 x 236 cm. Copenhagen, Statens Museum for Kunst, inv. no. KMS1310a.
41. This picture was unknown until 2012, when it was auctioned by Christie’s, London, 4 December 2012, lot 18; it was offered by descendants of William Burn Callander (1792-1854) of Preston Hall, M Mellonian. The picture was acquired by the Broere Charitable Foundation and is now on loan to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

Thus two of Jordaens’ most startling creations, *Odysseus in the Cave of Polyphemus* and *Odysseus and Nausicaa*, seem to have been rejected. The first was to catch Rubens’ eye, for it was probably that listed as part of his collection to be put up for sale after his death in 1640.\(^{39}\) Of the versions of *Odysseus and Nausicaa*, in which the shipwrecked Odysseus kneels nearly naked in front of Nausicaa and her handmaidens before the tree beneath which he had slept, that in the Noordbrabants Museum is quite abbreviated,\(^{40}\) whereas both a fully worked up painting\(^{41}\) and the two finished cartoons mentioned above are of a far more ambitious description of the episode.

Of the subjects that were woven, two were particularly complex and ambitious, but when Carlo Emanuele and his wife planned the room for which they were destined both were mutilated to fit the available space. *Telemachus leading Theoklymenos to his Mother* was divided into two separate pieces, while about a third of the composition showing *Odysseus in the Court of Alcinous* (Fig. 10) was omitted. *Hermes at Calypso’s Table* as planned by Jordaens had fewer figures and was less complex in its setting, but its composition too was reduced in order to accommodate the requirements of the Duke and Duchess.

Although Odysseus is not present, this scene, the penultimate of the hero’s lengthy staging posts on his return to his native land, is the first that directly concerned his predicament to be
described in Homer’s epic. The hero had washed up alone on the Isle of Ogygia after his ship was wrecked in a storm wrought by an implacably hostile Poseidon. Odysseus related how the ‘fair-tressed... guileful Calypso, a dread goddess, and [with whom]... no one either of gods or mortals has anything to do’ had taken him to her home and, he continued, ‘she said she would make me immortal and ageless all my days, but she could never persuade the heart in my breast. There for seven years I remained continually, and always with my tears I kept wet the immortal clothes which Calypso gave me’. At this point Zeus the Thunderer, at Pallas Athene’s behest, intervened and commanded the divine messenger Hermes to tell Calypso that she must release Odysseus so that he could return to his native land and his wife Penelope. Homer describes the scene Hermes found when he reached Calypso’s domain: ‘...he came to a great cave, wherein dwelt the fair-tressed nymph... A great fire was burning in the hearth, and far over the isle spread the fragrance of split cedar and citronwood, as they burned... Round about the cave grew a luxuriant wood, alder and poplar and smelt trees, cypress... There even an immortal, who chanced to come, might gaze and marvel, and delight his soul’.

At the ensuing interview Calypso bewailed the envy of the gods ‘seeing that ye begrudge goddesses that they should mate with men openly, if any takes a mortal as her own bed-fellow’. The ‘great-hearted’ Odysseus was of course absent ‘for he sat weeping on the shore, in his accustomed place, racking his heart with tears and groans and griefs...’ Jordaens, perhaps attracted by the description of the idyllic island and the flickering light in the interior of the cave, depicted the moment described by Homer when the goddess set before Hermes ‘a table laden with ambrosia [food of the gods] and mixed the red nectar. So he drank and ate...’

From Homer’s delightful and evocative account, Jordaens was inspired to depict a table scene very much in the idiom of the Dutch Caravaggesques active in the 1620s. Although the text required dignity and restraint, his Hermes at Calypso’s Table bears comparison with such a works as Gerrit van Honthorst’s Concert of c.1626–27 in the Borghese (Fig. 11) with its sharp lighting from the side. Of course there is none of the ‘bravo’ atmosphere evident in so many of such gatherings created in Utrecht, but Jordaens, who as we have seen never visited Rome, would have learnt Caravaggesque elements in Rubens’ art of the previous decade and would have been inspired by the lighting in Caravaggio’s own Madonna of the Rosary, (illustrated here Fig. 4, p. 65) which was acquired by Rubens and his friends and installed in the Dominican church in Antwerp by c.1620. The setting at table would have appealed by striking a cord with the artist’s recent popular series of The Satyr and the Peasant Family illustrating Aesop’s moral fable warning against inconsistency and those who blow hot or cold. A large rendering (with The Matthiesen Gallery, London, 1993) with its numerous
pentimenti shows him developing his ideas c. 1616-18,44 which culminated in a group of masterpieces, of which one at Cassel has been dated c. 1623-25. A starting point for Jordaens may have been a print by Marcus Gheeraerts the Elder (1557-1629). 45 But he was to reject the high viewpoint and although he first conceived the scene as an upright in which the ceiling of a barn is depicted, he preferred the challenge of describing it from below and close-up in such a way that the legs of the furniture and the protagonists require disentangling. He chose bright, slanting lighting with shadows and rearranged the protagonists in the varying versions so as to find different ways to express the effect of the words of the truth-speaking satyr. About twenty years later the artist’s interest in the potential of gatherings at table was revived in his renderings of the The King Drinks and As the old sing, so the young pipe, the hilarious scenes of family life for which Jordaens is famous.

For the treatment in the Odysseus series, Jordaens may have referred to the print after Rubens’ Supper at Emmaus of 1611 by Willem van Swanenburg (1581-1612), the prototype of which is lost (Fig. 12). 46 In particular, he may have been struck by the disciple seen from behind, who leans forward as Christ reveals himself. This was to be the inspiration for his formulation of Hermes, and the numerous pentimenti in the figure show the amount of trouble he expended to obtain the most expressive result. Of prime concern was his desire to convey the god’s calm conduct of the interview, which would not have been conveyed by the tense posture of the disciple’s right arm. He altered this, perhaps with the gesture of Paris’ right arm in Fig. 12. Willem van Swanenburg after Rubens, The Last Supper.

44. Matthiessen, London, Fifty Paintings 1535-1825, 1993, pp. 55-59, no. 9, ill. and succeeding essay in this catalogue.
Rubens’ earlier *Judgement of Paris* in the London National Gallery in mind (Fig. 13). 47 Jordaens’ interest in the rear view of the seated pose resurfaced later when he considered the theme of *Jupiter and Mercury in the House of Philemon and Baucis*, 48 where the loose wings on Mercury’s hat are similar. (Fig. 14).

At about the same time, the pose was adopted for Pirithous in a compositional sketch for a *Banquet of Achelous* (c. 1630 or earlier Fig.15). 49 At the other end of the table, beside Achelous, are two women who relate closely to those beside Calypso. The placement of the servant’s arms pouring wine, especially her right arm, recalls the study by Rubens 50 for the daughter in his *Lot and his Daughters*, once at Blenheim and recently sold at auction. 51 Jordaens’ servant balancing a basket on her hip, her face in lost profile, is a pose probably also inspired by a supposed, but not extant, Rubens life-study similar to that for Lot’s daughter pouring wine, while the position of the left arm is already suggested in one of the servants in Lot’s train. Conspicuous is the standing servant bringing a basket of bread to the table, her face in half-shadow. Her pose brings Titian’s portrait of Lavinia with a tray of fruit to mind, a version of which was said to be in a private Antwerp collection about 20 years later. 52 But to search

47. Oil on panel, 133.9 x 174.5 cm. London, The National Gallery, inv. no. NG6379.
48. A lost painting was engraved in reverse by N.Lauwers, c.1630, see I.Schaudies in [Exh.Cat.]*Jordaens and the Antique*, Royal Museum of Fine Arts of Belgium, 2012, pp. 152-153, no. 58 and Fig.13 here. An oil sketch after this composition is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (CAI.93).
51. Private collection, on loan to the Metropolitan Museum, New York, oil on canvas, 190 x 225 cm, sold at Christie’s, London, 7 July 2016, lot 12.
here for conscious borrowing in emulation is unnecessary as the pose nearly repeats that used for the maid in Jordaens’ earlier portrayal of himself with his parents and siblings in the Hermitage (Fig. 16 overleaf).53

Behind the group of three by the table is a fourth servant, her face lit by the fire in the cave. Jordaens would have found in Rubens’ work of about 1615 two paintings where candlelight threw light and shadow on a face: Judith with the Head of Holofernes in Braunschweig (Fig. 17) and Night Scene with an Old Woman and Child in the Mauritshuis.54 The younger artist continued to explore the play of artificial light in the Maid servant with a Basket of Fruit,55 which repeats the central motif of a tapestry design for one of the already discussed Scenes of Country Life.

In Jordaens’ earliest existing painting of 1616, the Adoration of the Shepherds,56 the artist juggled with two different artificial light sources, emulating Rubens who in his earlier Samson and Delilah57 had manipulated four. However at the entrance to Calypso’s cave he was content to contrast the strong outdoor light flooding low onto the protagonists with the lurid glow from the darkness within. This natural light emphasizes the muscled back of Hermes, contrasting it with the smooth female forms and in particular the impassive and beautiful, rose-tinted face of the goddess, as yet unmoved, as Hermes raises his wine glass to her in acknowledgement of her hospitality.

Fig. 17. Rubens, Judith with the Head of Holofernes, Braunschweig

I n the widening scope of pictorial representation in Antwerp at the time when Jordaens was embarking on his career, still-life and animal specialists began to come to the fore. It remains debatable as to whether he ever turned to still-life specialists for the fruit and flowers that were to enhance his renderings of abundance and fertility, but his protean genius embraced the depictions of animals early on, and the alert goat standing in the entrance to the cave must be one of the artist’s earliest treatments of what was to become a favourite creature. Above, a parrot and peacock are also harbingers of Jordaens’ well-observed menagerie. In the treatment of the bread and fruit brought to the feast, Jordaens shows himself to have mastered the still-life idiom established by the great Frans Snyders (1579-1657).

For the alert viewer the two exotic birds might have added associations that provided further accents to Homer’s story. In the parrot could be read references to both the eloquence of Hermes and maybe the love harboured by Calypso58, while in the peacock would have been seen the emblem of the goddess Hera, protectress of marriage.

H ermes at Calypso’s Table by Jordaens of c. 1625-35 has only recently come to light and thus has not been discussed in studies on the artist. It is at once mysterious in atmosphere and imbued with a sense of potential drama, a striking addition to those works Jordaens executed both to accompany and be part of his preparations for one of his earliest essays in the tapestry business. In this case, it takes the composition

53. Oil on canvas, 175 x 137.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, inv. no. GE 484, see N. Gritsay and N. Babina, State Hermitage Museum Catalogues Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Flemish Painting, New Haven/London, pp. 147-149.
54. Oil on panel, 79 x 64 cm, kept by Rubens for his own collection, offered by Sotheby’s, London, 7 July 2004, lot 10.
55. Oil on canvas, 119.6 x 137 cm, Glasgow, Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, inv. no. 84.
56. Oil on canvas, transferred from wood, 106.7 x 76.2 cm. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. no. 67.187.76.
57. Oil on panel, 185 x 205 cm. London, National Gallery, inv. no. 6661.
a step further, following his execution of an oil sketch that was last recorded in the Reimann collection in Stensbygaard (Fig. 18), working out and clarifying ideas adumbrated there. Nonetheless pentimenti, most notably in the profile and the fall of Hermes’ prominent cloak, point to the typically rapid, thoughtful energy that Jordaens brought to his art, encouraged no doubt by his observation of Rubens’ working practice (Figs. 19a to 19i). Of the eight or so other paintings that fall into the same procedural category for this series, all of different sizes or supports, five are in public collections, one is on public permanent loan, another is a studio version and the whereabouts of the last is unknown. The painting should not be seen as executed as part of the process of the actual production of the tapestry. Rather, we imagine the weaver and/or dealer concerned with commissioning the series studying it as a finished sample of the prospective appearance of the much larger tapestry. For Jordaens there was the further advantage that it could later be sold as an independent work of art. Thus his painting of _Odysseus and Polyphemus_ was also to become available and Rubens was to acquire and retain it in his collection until his death.  

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59. The oil sketch was bought by A. Reimann in 1923 and was passed on to his widow. The picture has not surfaced since its presentation in the Jordaens exhibition of 1968-69 in Ottawa and its current whereabouts are thus unknown.