LAUNCH OF THE RUBENS YEAR IN GOTHA

Reunited after more than 80 years: Five oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens on display together in Gotha for the first time since 1945



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It is a history of loss, looted art, art theft, and a decades-long search. In 1945, one of the most significant groups of works in the Gotha collection was torn apart. The five oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens, which were once on display together at the Ducal Museum, ended up in various locations after the Second World War. Two were taken to Russia, three went into the American art trade. For more than 80 years, the five artworks were separated from one another. Now, the most outstanding group of paintings of the Ducal Museum is returning to its rightful place.

The oil sketches will be presented in the **special exhibition "Rubens in Gotha. Collection, Loss and Return"**, on view in the Hall of the Netherlandish Masters of the Ducal Museum Gotha from 10 November 2026 to 9 May 2027.

This reunion forms the surprising and festive launch of the Rubens Year in Gotha. Today, the Friedenstein Foundation Gotha is celebrating alongside **Christian Tischner**, Thuringian Minister of Education, Science and Culture, the Belgian Ambassador **Piet Heirbaut**, the General Delegate of Flanders **Bart Brosius**, and **Dr. Martin Hoernes**, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation.

A Collection is torn apart

Shortly before the Red Army took over the region from the American forces in July 1945, the ducal family had the most valuable works of art from the Ducal Museum's collection transported to Coburg as a 'temporary protective measure'. Only a few of these works have since returned to Gotha. Although they had belonged to an independent Gotha art foundation since 1928, artworks were unlawfully sold and ended up in museums and on the art market. Among them were three of the five Rubens sketches.

The Red Army's Trophy Commission transported several railway carriages full of paintings from Gotha to Russia, in breach of international law. Only a fraction of them were returned, including two Rubens sketches, which were restituted to the GDR in 1958 and have been on display in Gotha since 1959.

The collection of five Rubens sketches, which had grown since the early 18th century, remained scattered. Whilst two works were back in Gotha, three others had found new owners and locations via the American art trade. The historic group of works, which had been a particular highlight of the Ducal Museum until the Second World War, henceforth existed only in memory and in the historical inventories of the Gotha collection.



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The Return

In 2024, with the help of Christie's auction house, the Rubens sketch "**Saint Gregory of Nazianzus**" was successfully recovered from the Buffalo AKG Art Museum.

Two years later, on 9 November 2026, the Ducal Museum celebrates the return of another work: "**The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot**". This is the first of five oil sketches acquired for the ducal painting collection, which Duke Frederick II of Saxe-Gotha-Altenburg (1676–1732) had already brought to Friedenstein and which, after 1945, had ended up in a private American collection. The art dealership **Cabinet Turquin** (Paris) acted as an intermediary in reaching a fair compromise regarding the painting's return.

Almost at the same time, an **agreement was also reached with the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection**. The last sketch still missing, "**Saint Augustine**", can therefore be exhibited in Gotha on loan, for which we are grateful to **Alexander Jolles**, president of the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection.



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Peter Paul Rubens and the Jesuit Church in Antwerp

An artist's creative power is best seen in his drafts or, as in this case, in the oil sketches by Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). The patrons who commissioned the paintings for the Jesuit church of Sint-Carolus Borromeus in Antwerp had stipulated that the 39 designs for the depictions of saints in the church should be executed by Rubens himself.

Today, the oil sketches from 1620 are of even greater significance: in 1718, a fire destroyed the original ceiling paintings. As primary sources, the sketches are of inestimable value and provide a precious testimony to the total work of art that has since been destroyed. They became highly sought-after collector's items, for which collectors were soon competing.

Loss, Theft and Return

The highly significant collections at Friedenstein Palace have suffered losses due to embezzlement, wartime relocations and, finally, numerous thefts in the post-war period, to an extent experienced by few comparable ducal collections. Most recently, in 1979, the greatest art heist in the GDR once again decimated the collection. The loot—five precious Old Master paintings—could only be recovered 40 years later with the help of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation. Since then, the Foundation has been committed not only to the recovery of lost works of art, but also to establishing a legally sound basis for restitution claims. Those involved in this process included art law specialist Dr Friederike von Brühl and legal expert Prof. Dr Thomas Finkenauer. In the case of the Rubens sketches, the Foundation acted as the sole sponsor, financing the repatriation following the reaching of compromises.

Quotes

"The fact that these significant Rubens oil sketches are on display together again in Gotha for the first time in more than 80 years is an extraordinary achievement for the Friedenstein and for Thuringia as a cultural region. Their return also demonstrates the importance of persistent scholarly research into stories of loss and the joint commitment of strong partners both at home and abroad, including the E. G. Bührle Collection Foundation in Zurich. I would like to extend my special thanks to the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, which has supported the Friedenstein Foundation Gotha for many years with great expertise, personal dedication, and substantial financial resources. This enables us not only to preserve and research important cultural heritage, but also to bring lost connections back into view."

Christian Tischner, Thuringian Minister of Education, Science and Culture

"It is nothing short of a miracle that Peter Paul Rubens' five oil studies can now be seen together again at the Ducal Museum after more than 80 years. They are not only five unique masterpieces by the Flemish painter and the jewels of the Gotha art collection, but also bear witness to European and international history. They reflect both the outstanding connoisseurship of the former Dukes of Gotha and the deep political rifts and upheavals of the 20th century. Following years of legal clarification and intensive provenance research, it has been possible, in close cooperation with the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation, to reunite this unique group of works."

Dr Tobias Pfeifer-Helke, Director of the Friedenstein Foundation Gotha

"Ever since the spectacular return of the five stolen Old Master paintings to Gotha, the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation has had a 'run' of art-related mysteries. In recent years, we have therefore funded the legal investigation into the various 'lines of loss' and are now able to set out the claims of the Friedenstein Foundation Gotha regarding displaced artwork more clearly than before. The fact that, after years of preparatory work, we have now succeeded in finding amicable solutions for all the missing oil sketches and can finally exhibit the entire collection together brings great joy to the whole foundation!"

Dr Martin Hoernes, Secretary General of the Ernst von Siemens Art Foundation

"Paintings bear witness to the era in which they were created. They also carry within them the stories of their former owners. Above all, however, they are works of art that are meant to be seen and explored. This is particularly true for the artistic oeuvre of Peter Paul Rubens, which is timeless and universal. The joint exhibition of these five works by Rubens in Gotha is a great success, a cultural and museum highlight. The Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection is delighted to be able to contribute to the success of this exhibition and would like to thank the Friedenstein Foundation Gotha, as well as Dr Tobias Pfeifer-Helke and Dr Martin Hoernes, for their constructive and successful collaboration."

Alexander Jolles, President of the Foundation E. G. Bührle Collection

1. **Peter Paul Rubens**, *Saint Augustine*, 1620, oil on oak panel, 48 × 63.5 cm. © Emil Bührle Collection, permanent loan to Kunsthaus Zürich
2. **Peter Paul Rubens**, *The Prophet Elijah in the Golden Chariot*, 1620/21, oil on oak panel, 32.5 × 44 cm. © Eric Turquin
3. **Peter Paul Rubens**, *Saint Gregory of Nazianzus*, 1621, oil on oak panel, 48 × 62 cm. © Friedenstein Foundation Gotha; photograph: Julius Fröbus GmbH
4. **Peter Paul Rubens**, *Saint Basil*, 1620, oil on oak panel, 49.5 × 64.4 cm. © Friedenstein Foundation Gotha; photograph: Julius Fröbus GmbH
5. **Peter Paul Rubens**, *Saint Athanasius Triumphing over Arius*, 1620, oil on oak panel, 49.6 × 64.4 cm. © Friedenstein Foundation Gotha; photograph: Julius Fröbus GmbH

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