



TWO HEADS, HERE ATTRIBUTED TO RUBENS. PANEL, 46.9 BY 66 CM.

A NEW RUBENS BY TANCRED BORENIUS

IN the study of the surviving work of Rubens, a particularly complex problem is, as is well known, offered by the frequent difficulty of determining to what extent the master himself was responsible for the actual execution of a given picture. We possess ample evidence to show that Rubens was, in fact, the head of a great picture factory, and the majority of the countless paintings which issued from his studio were to a large extent the handiwork of his pupils and assistants, inspired, controlled and corrected by the master. Rubens himself made absolutely no secret of his methods of work; on the contrary, in letters to his patrons, he would detail, with complete candour, the amount of work he himself had devoted to such and such a picture, and how much he had left to his assistants. Unfortunately, however, such authoritative testimony is but rarely forthcoming; and hence opinions often go asunder as to whether a Rubens picture ought to be labelled "master" or "atelier" or "school." There exist, however, inevitably two categories of pictures, to which the test of quality can usually be applied without causing much dissent, so triumphantly do the master's spirit and handiwork assert themselves in them. One such group is formed by his brilliant sketches in oils for his elaborate compositions; and the other by such transcripts from nature—usually the human figure—as he was able swiftly to carry out himself from start to finish,

thereby storing up material upon which he could draw later as circumstances demanded.

To the latter category belongs the splendid study of two male figures, hitherto unrecorded in Rubens literature, which we are privileged to reproduce herewith [PLATE]. Here, surely, every brush stroke speaks of the master himself: the swiftness is only equalled by the certainty which guides his hand; and the suggestion of the pulsation of life, of the sparkle of light, is as gloriously convincing as it only is with Rubens at his very best.

The bronzed complexion and cut of features of the man on the left suggests, with little doubt, a southerner—a Spaniard or even a Moor; and there is something more Latin than Flemish in the figure on the right. It is curious to observe, how, in these circumstances, the picture takes on a strong affinity to the art of Caravaggio, who, at the time of Rubens's first arrival in Rome, was the most talked of artist of the day. We have many proofs of the enthusiastic admiration with which the young Rubens regarded the great leader of the Naturalists—an admiration which he retained until the end of his life.

To what extent Rubens made use of these studies is not quite easy to determine. Both heads suggest the type of models which we find in the great *Adoration of the Magi* of 1624, in the Antwerp Museum: indeed, perhaps it would not be entirely fanciful to see in these two heads the artist's first reaction to the

characters which re-appear in that composition as the Moorish King and the retainer immediately to the right of him. In any case, a date about 1624—

the period of Rubens' full maturity and mastery—would, from every point of view, suit the present picture admirably.