



Sébastien Bourdon (Montpellier 1616 - Paris 1672)

The Deposition from the Cross

oil on canvas

55¾ by 45 in.; 142 by 114 cm.

Bears a red wax seal with the Spencer coat of arms on the reverse.

Likely painted between 1640 and 1643, *The Deposition* is an early work by Bourdon, from the beginning of his first Paris period, just predating the *Crucifixion of Saint Peter* painted for Notre-Dame. The picture shares a similar compositional structure and use of heavily robed, leaning figures, as found in other early religious works such as *King Solomon Sacrificing to the Idols* (Private Collection), and *Tobit Burying the Dead* (Valence, Musée des Beaux-Arts).

A smaller autograph replica of the composition, of smaller dimensions and horizontal in format, is located in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier. An anonymous copy is also recorded in the former collection of Cardinal Joseph Fesch.

Until recently, this picture formed part of the illustrious Spencer collection, where it hung at Althorp House for over a century, along with masterpieces by Rubens, van Dyck, Giordano and Guercino. To this day, the Spencer collection remains one of the most important intact family collections in Europe, one that was begun in earnest by Robert Spencer, 2nd Earl of Sunderland (1641-1702).

Paris Bourdon was born in Treviso and grew up in a noble family, receiving a formal education. Initially he entered the bottega of Titian in 1509, but by 1518 he was already registered as an independent master. According to Giorgio Vasari, to whom we are indebted for nearly all the facts of Bourdon's life, he did not spend many years with Titian, having left the older master's workshop due to conflicts with his teacher. In his early career Bourdon consciously based his art on that of Giorgione. However, he did not simply imitate Giorgione's style, but used it as inspiration, enlivening works with elements taken from Titian and Pordenone, Titian's great rival in Venice.

Bourdon's first real recognition came in 1534 when he won the competition of the Scuola Grande di S. Marco to execute the *Presentation of the Ring to the Doge* (Venice, Addademia). Soon however, his

work was much sought after outside of Italy, especially by the royalty of France. Both his religious paintings and portraits, especially those of women, were highly regarded. Bourdon subsequently executed many important mural paintings in Venice, Treviso and Vicenza, all of which unfortunately have perished. According to Vasari he was invited to France in 1538 by Francis I, at whose court he painted many works, including religious and mythological scenes, as well as portraits, most notably, those of women. Unfortunately, no trace of them is to be found in French collections. On his return journey he undertook works of great importance for the Fugger palace at Augsburg, which again have been lost.

Bourdon worked for the moneyed élite of northern Italy and Bavaria, for the royalty of France and Poland, and had works commissioned to be sent to Spain and to Flanders. Despite knowledge of the important patrons for whom he worked, the chronology of his oeuvre is by no means clear. Dating on stylistic grounds is confounded by the diverse sources on which he drew, ranging from the Emilian, Lombard and Venetian to the French and northern European, depending on the patron. His principal surviving works are the Fisherman and Doge at the Venice Academy; a Daphnis and Chloe and a Portrait of a Lady in the National Gallery, London; while a Holy Family is at Bridgwater House. Other important works of his are the Madonna in the Tadini collection, the Louvre; paintings in the Duomo of Treviso; two mythological pictures at the Villa Borghese and the Doria Palace in Rome; the Chess Players in Berlin, a very little-known portrait of superb quality in the possession of the Landgrave of Hesse at Kronberg; and a Baptism of Christ in Philadelphia. Besides these, there are examples of his art in Bergamo, Milan, Genoa, Padua, Siena, Venice, Florence, Munich, Dresden and Vienna.

Bourdon's pictures have a certain nobility of style, with beautiful harmonies of subtle color which can be traced back to his knowledge of the work of Titian. His works reveal a naturalistic approach to the human figure, and he shows the dignity and individuality of the each of his subjects.

Provenance:

Robert Spencer, 2nd Earl of Sunderland (1641-1702);
By descent to his grandson, the Hon. John Spencer (1708-1746), Althorp, Northampton,
Northamptonshire;
By descent to the Earls Spencer, Althorp, Northampton, Northamptonshire.

Exhibitions

New York, Wildenstein & Co. Inc., The Arts of France, October 2005 - January 2006, no. 21

Literature:

- A List of Pictures Belonging to the Hon. John Spencer, Scheduled for Mortgage, 1742 (published by K.J. Garlick, 1974-1976);
G. Knapton, Catalogue of the Pictures at Althorpe and Wimbledon belonging to the late Hon. Mr Spencer, 25 October 1746, no 192; A Catalogue of the Pictures of Althorp taken in the Year 1750, Hertford, County Hall, Hertfordshire Record Office, no. SG13 8DE;
Catalogue of the Pictures at Althorp made in November 1802 (as Nicolas Poussin);
T.F. Didbin, *Aedes Althorpianae*, London 1822, p. 11; Jones' Views of the Seats, Mansions, Castles &c., of Noblemen and Gentlemen in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland..., London 1829, n.p.;
Catalogue of the Pictures at Althorp House, London 1851, no. 255; C. Hofstede de Groot, *A Catalogue Raisonné...*, vol. IV, London 1912, p. 461, no. 17a (as Adriaen van de Velde);
K.J. Garlick, "A Catalogue of the Pictures at Althorp," in *The Walpole Society*, XLV, 1974-1976, pp. xiii, 8, no. 54, reproduced, plate 31, fig. 54;
Paris, Hôtel Prince de Galles auction catalogue, *Tableaux anciens, meubles et objets d'art, extrême orient*, 12 June 1995, p. 8, under lot 4;
C. Saumarez Smith, "Spencer (1) Robert Spencer," in *The Dictionary of Art*, London 1996, vol. XIX, p. 381;
J. Thuillier, Sébastien Bourdon, exhibition catalogue, Paris 2000, p. 153-4, cat. no. 5-1, under no. 5-2;
J. Stourton and C. Sebag-Montefiore, *The British as Art Collectors, from the Tudors to the Present*, London 2012, p. 79