

Peter Paul Rubens

THE DECIUS MUS CYCLE



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THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

THE COLLECTIONS OF THE PRINCE OF LIECHTENSTEIN



THE SEQUENCE OF paintings on the history of the Roman consul Decius Mus, which has been one of the greatest glories of the Liechtenstein collection since its acquisition in 1693, occupies a significant position in the work of Peter Paul Rubens (Flemish, 1577–1640). In it the artist uses for the first time the cycle form—that is, the narration of a story through a series of paintings. The development of a sequence of monumental works with abundant imagery and forceful visual impact had a great attraction for Rubens. Again and again he turned his artistic energy to creating cycles, the foremost being the huge paintings celebrating the life of the French queen Maria de' Medici (Louvre, Paris). The Decius Mus cycle is a seminal force in Rubens's career in yet another sense. It is one of the earliest works in which he presented an episode from Roman history; here he made one of his first forays into classical antiquity, a domain that later inspired some of his most important paintings. Rubens himself can be understood only in the context of his extensive classical education. As a member of a circle of humanists around Justus Lipsius, the great master of classical philology and Neostoical philosophy, Rubens was well acquainted with antique thought, literature, and art, regarding as preeminent the authority of these ancient thinkers. The Decius Mus cycle also represents the artist's debut into tapestry design. These large paintings were not planned as autonomous works of art; instead, the canvases were composed as cartoons, designs that were followed by the weavers as they transformed the master's compositions into tapestries. The Decius Mus cycle was a successful debut for Rubens into the field of tapestry weaving, a time-honored art that was developed in his native Flanders and later spread throughout Europe. Other Flemish artists, especially Jacob Jordaens, followed Rubens's example, thus reaffirming Flanders as the center of tapestry weaving in seventeenth-century Europe.

Documentary evidence indicates that Rubens's preparatory work on the cycle took place between November 1616 and May 1618 and that the commissioners of the series were Genoese noblemen, who have not been identified. Rubens repeatedly visited Genoa during his Italian sojourn, particularly in 1605 and 1606, and he became well acquainted with patrons in that city, serving them with splendid portraits and, later, in 1622, publishing their residences in a volume of engraved views and plans collected during his stays there. It was in Genoa that Raphael's models for the tapestry cycle *The Acts of the Apostles* (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London) were preserved, and Rubens studied and recorded these cartoons in drawings. Given the personality of Rubens, it seems not unlikely that he would want to prove to Genoa and to the world that he was capable of works that would equal or perhaps even surpass Raphael's cartoons. The concept of the *agon*—the eagerly entered contest with predecessors or contemporaries—is characteristic of antique art; revived during the Renaissance, it was one of the vital forces that drove Rubens. We continually find him placing himself in competition with the masters of the Renaissance as well as of the classical past. Since he had studied Raphael's cartoons, he might have longed for the opportunity to create an important cartoon series of his own. And by working in oil, rather than the traditional technique of charcoal and colored chalks on paper, he could prove his cartoons to be technically superior to those of his predecessor. Furthermore, as a commission from Genoa, the Decius Mus cycle would be studied by contemporary Italian connoisseurs. Ten years earlier, when he completed the Vallicella altarpiece for the Chiesa Nuova, Rome, Rubens took great pride in challenging the achievements of his Italian colleagues. Italy, the “nutrix of art,” profoundly influenced Rubens; reliance on and incorporation of masterpieces from both antiquity and the Renaissance, so evident in the Decius Mus cycle, demonstrate the lessons he had learned from Italy. In his art, however, these antique and Italianate elements were assimilated and transformed in a truly masterly way.

Close examination of the large canvases proves that certain parts should clearly be attributed

to Rubens's atelier. Since the painted area is approximately one hundred square yards, this participation is not surprising. The success of Rubens's atelier lay in the subordination of individual talents to the conceptions of the master artist, and rather than engaging in futile attempts to label workshop areas with the names of individual assistants, it is of much greater import to distinguish accurately between the work of Rubens himself and that of his atelier. Large sections of the canvases are indeed splendid examples of Rubens's own brushwork with its characteristic forcefulness and with the sparkling lights of his modeling. In particular paintings, such as *Decius Mus Relating His Dream* and *The Consecration of Decius Mus*, the master's brilliantly vivid style is maintained with a confident ease that no assistant, however gifted, could achieve. Among the four tapestry cycles designed by Rubens, the Decius Mus cycle is the only one in which the artist participated in the execution of the monumental cartoons, a task that stimulated him to a performance of overwhelming grandeur.

The cycle comprises eight cartoons, six with scenes of the narrative action and two with female personifications and a trophy intended to serve as so-called *entre-fenêtres* for narrow strips of walls between windows. The first two sets of tapestries for the Genoese clients were woven by the Brussels workshop of Jan Raes the Elder. During the seventeenth century the Decius Mus series was extraordinarily popular, and some twenty further sets were produced from Rubens's designs, but by other manufactories and with varying completeness and border decoration. Since the late nineteenth century parts of a set by Jan Raes woven with gold threads have been in the Liechtenstein collection; these might possibly be identified with one of the two sets, the *editiones principes*, produced for Genoa. A comparable series is in the Prado, Madrid.

In 1661 six of the present paintings were owned by two Antwerp painters, Gonzales Coques and Jan Baptist van Eyck, together with Jan Carel de Witte. Later they appeared in the estate of van Eyck after his death in 1692. Shortly thereafter, Prince Johann Adam von Liechtenstein acquired the series, supplemented by the two other pictures, which had been in the possession of the Emperor Leopold I, for a total of 11,000 gulden, through the Antwerp art dealer Marcus Forchoudt. The admiration of the Prince for this series is apparent in the exceptionally sumptuous carved cartouches of their frames, which were commissioned by the Prince from the sculptor Giovanni Giuliani in 1706. They were intended to enhance what was considered then, and remains, the greatest pride of the Liechtenstein collection.

## *Decius Mus Relating His Dream*

OIL ON CANVAS, 115<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 109 in. (293.5 x 277 cm.)

ALTHOUGH WELL-KNOWN and repeatedly cited as a model of virtue, the story of Decius Mus did not appeal to any artist before Rubens. His Vaduz cycle is, therefore, the first painted narration of this heroic episode in the war between the Romans and the Latins, recounted by Livy (*Ab urbe condita* 8.6.8–8.10.10). The Latins, a tribe inhabiting the plains of Latium, had long been subject to Rome. They rose in rebellion in the Latin War (340–338 B.C.), which for Rome began inauspiciously. Both armies pitched their camps near Capua, and the Roman leaders, the co-consuls Titus Manlius and Decius Mus, faced an enemy far superior in strength. At this critical point “in the stillness of the night both consuls are said to have been visited by the same apparition, a man of greater than human stature and more majestic, who declared that the commander of one side, and the army of the other, must be offered up to the Manes and to Mother Earth; and that in whichever host the general should devote to death the enemy's

legions and himself with them, that nation and that side would have the victory.” Only a personal act of extraordinary bravery would therefore save Rome. The sacrifice of his life would enable one of the two consuls to restore Rome’s invincibility, and death would be linked most dramatically to victory. With this prophecy—the premise of the further action and the center of the plot—Rubens takes up his narration.

It is fascinating to observe how the painter adapted the classical source in selecting, interpreting, and sharpening the action according to his own need. Thus, Rubens restricts his account to the hero of his cycle, disregarding, except in his last painting, Titus Manlius, co-consul and one of the story’s protagonists. While Livy unfolds the conflict between the two armies that forced the Roman side to consider winning by sacrificing a commander in the battle, Rubens simply starts by illustrating the military functions of his hero: here Decius alone steps up to his troops and tells them of his dream. Standing on an elevation, the *suggestus*, the consul addresses his soldiers; his words are vividly emphasized by his raised right arm, which is extended in a rhetorical gesture. To the right, standard-bearers of different units and varying battle dresses stand, their eyes riveted on their commander. Though few in number, they are ingeniously arranged to give the impression of a listening crowd.

The scene of a commander addressing his legates and tribunes from an elevated position is based, as previous writers have noted, on the *adlocutio*, a pictorial formula that was frequently used in Roman art. In recreating this heroic event, Rubens therefore turned to an ancient image as the most trustworthy prototype. The *adlocutio* had occupied a distinctive role in Roman political propaganda, expressing both the authority of military leaders and the loyalty of their forces. Showing not only an oration but also a ceremonial act of state, the *adlocutio* combined aspects of narrated reality and martial glorification. Examples may be found on the reverse of coins from the imperial era and on such Roman triumphal monuments as the Column of Trajan, the Column of Marcus Aurelius, and the Arch of Constantine. Titian had used this device for his *Allocution of Alfonso d’Avalos, Marchese del Vasto* (Prado, Madrid), but Rubens’s rendering of the theme follows the antique authority more conscientiously, and he achieves a surprising affinity to his particular model, a relief of the helical frieze of the Column of Trajan. Emerging from and appealing to a scholarly mind, this archaeological reconstruction nevertheless succeeds in reanimating a formula of the classical past, a past that Rubens regarded as one of the pillars of his art.

Rubens did not restrict his acceptance of the authority of the antique to a single motif. Far more important, the flow, rhythm, and structure of his narration of the story of Decius Mus are firmly rooted in Roman historical representations, such as the frieze on the Column of Trajan. A closer look at the changes Rubens introduced between the preparatory work on his cycle and its final version will make this clear. The oil sketch for this painting (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.) reveals that the painter toyed with the idea of assigning part of the story to the heavenly powers, with Jupiter’s eagle soaring above the consul as a divine protector. Rubens would later use such mythical elements in his cycle on the history of Maria de’ Medici and, in fact, in all his further political representations and allegories. In the present large version and in the entire Decius Mus cycle, the painter does not, however, extend the action to include supernatural forces. These paintings are limited to historical reality. Describing the *res gestae* of a Roman consul as concrete events, Rubens uses a heroic narrative style similar to that of Livy’s history and of the imperial monuments of Rome.

In a most significant detail, Rubens points out immediately that this is a story about Rome. The embossment of the consul’s helmet, piled up with a shield like a still life at the foot of the *suggestus*, shows the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus, the founders of Rome. Denoting the

owner as a Roman patriot, the gleaming helmet and shield may be regarded as emblems of the military virtue embodied in Decius Mus. Like this detail, the composition as a whole reveals the master's personal conception of a historical past. In the forceful opening of his cycle, Rubens evoked the manly spirit that made Rome and the deeds of its people great.

### *The Interpretation of the Victim*

OIL ON CANVAS, 115<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 162<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (293.5 x 413.5 cm.)

SHORTLY BEFORE THEIR decisive battle against the Latins, the Roman consuls Decius Mus and Titus Manlius offered sacrifices in order to learn which of the two, according to the gods' will, would have to give his life to secure victory for Rome. Sacrificial bulls were slaughtered, and the haruspex (a soothsayer whose predictions were based on examination of entrails) discovered that the bull offered by Decius Mus had an abnormal liver. Manlius's sacrifice had, however, been successful, and thus Decius was fated to die. In the present painting, Rubens depicts the moment when Decius Mus learns of the fatal omen. The dialogue of gestures and gazes—between the gray-bearded haruspex to whom the future has been revealed and the consul who now knows that he must die—is the focus of the whole ceremony. The altar is erected in front of the commander's tent; aulos players and acolytes attend the ceremony. Standard-bearers and followers of Decius Mus have gathered to witness this solemn moment; their faces express dismay and sorrow. While the bull to be sacrificed in the name of Titus Manlius is led forward by the *victimarii* (assistants to the sacrifice), the bull offered by Decius Mus lies killed on the ground. Most significantly—as both a thematic and a coloristic device—a golden bowl brimming with the blood of the sacrificed animal stands at the feet of the consul, whose own blood will be shed for his people. This golden vessel parallels that filled with Christ's blood and placed on the ground in Rubens's Antwerp altarpiece *The Descent from the Cross* of about 1612.

While presenting this scene as a dramatic prelude to the forthcoming sacrifice, that of a human victim, Rubens was determined to reproduce the Roman ceremonial rites with great accuracy. He incorporated archaeological elements in his composition, and in this he had a powerful model in Raphael's *Sacrifice at Lystra*, a cartoon for *The Acts of the Apostles*, a tapestry cycle intended for the Sistine Chapel at the Vatican. Rubens discloses his knowledge of Raphael's cartoon by borrowing from it the figure at the far left and the design of the altar. Rubens even went so far as to correct some small inaccuracies of his great predecessor. Raphael had shown a bull being slaughtered while wearing an *infula* (a sacred woolen fillet), but according to Roman ritual, the *infula* would have been removed before the animal was killed. Rubens, however, shows the *infula* appropriately—here it is worn only by the live bull. It seems almost certain that Rubens was acquainted with the ancient pictorial sources of the *immolatio* scene on which Raphael had based his composition, namely the sacrificial scene of the Aurelian reliefs in the Palazzo dei Conservatori in Rome, sarcophagi in the Uffizi, Florence, and the Palazzo Ducale, Mantua, showing the sacrifice of a bull, and one of the reliefs on the Column of Trajan in Rome.

Such a conscientious following of antique sources is evident in Rubens's treatment of the bull led to be slaughtered. In his famous discussion of Greek pictures, Pliny the Elder praised Pausias for painting a sacrifice in which the bull was shown frontally, the volumes of its body rendered by skillful foreshortening and, contrary to custom, painted in dark shadows close to the picture plane and in lighter tones behind. Although Raphael seems to have been inspired by Pliny's

remarks, only Rubens succeeded in achieving the qualities praised in Pausias. Pliny's account was therefore literally translated into the Baroque painting; challenged by a celebrated literary description, Rubens proved his art capable of emulating the skills of an antique painter. The present painting demonstrates both Rubens's deep veneration and knowledge of antiquity and his proud expansion of the Renaissance traditions embodied in Raphael. Here the earlier works so important to Rubens are subsumed and transformed into a most personal and powerful representation of a scene in which the word of the gods is conveyed to man.

## *The Consecration of Decius Mus*

OIL ON CANVAS, 113 x 131<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (287 x 334 cm.)

THE CONSUL'S DEATH—announced in a dream, confirmed by augury, and accepted with a manly willingness to sacrifice himself to ensure Rome's victory—could not occur without ceremony. According to Roman custom, it was necessary for the chosen victim to undergo a solemn rite, called the *devotio*. The most detailed ancient description of that ritual which survives is given by Livy in his account of Decius Mus. The hero destined for death had to devote his life and that of his enemies to the Manes, the gods of the underworld, and to Tellus, goddess of earth. Speaking the formulaic prayer he had to stand with both feet on an arrow “with head covered and a hand emerging from under a mantle wrapped closely beneath the chin,” as Pliny explains. Again Rubens faithfully records Livy's narrative. Followers of both the consul and the priest have stepped aside, leaving the two protagonists in the center of attention. Decius Mus stands with bowed head before the high priest Marcus Valerius, as his name is given by Livy; with the authority of one who represents divine power on earth, the priest reaches out and touches the consul's head in the time-honored gesture of blessing. In Livy this scene takes place in the heat of battle, but Rubens chooses to emphasize the moving pathos of the ceremony and places martial episodes in his later battle piece. Solemnity and grave pageantry mark the present scene, and it is the prayer itself that constitutes the action. At the very core of this ritual is the Roman virtue of *pietas*—that is, righteous behavior toward god and man. *Pietas* requires a readiness to submit humbly to the direction of the heavenly powers and a veneration of the word of gods; it is the foremost manly virtue. Thus, Vergil gives the epithet *pius* to the hero Aeneas; like him, Decius Mus is here characterized as a hero who embodies this distinctive Roman virtue. Not only because of this empathy with ancient thought, but also because of the powerful austerity of its composition and the imposing sonority of its color scheme, this painting stands out as the emotional climax of the cycle.

The picture's masterly accomplishment is heightened by the exceptional extent to which it was executed by Rubens himself. Large areas of this canvas display the characteristic forcefulness of Rubens's manner with the heavy contours and sparkling lights of his modeling. Faces and hands show a free and almost sketchy layering of colors, and the violent use of pure red in the flesh has to be acknowledged as a hallmark of the master's painting technique. The high priest's robe, where gleaming light establishes a sumptuous, weighty, yet animated surface, is a splendid example of his rapid brushwork. It is likely that Rubens wanted to refer to Early Netherlandish tradition in this depiction of patterned gold brocade. By contrast, the equivalent motif done by the atelier in the earlier scene of the sacrifice discloses the marked difference in quality between Rubens's own work and that of his followers. Another element executed by the master himself is the consul's battle steed held by waiting soldiers. This is undoubtedly one of the most remark-



able areas of the cycle, and it served as a model for the horses in the two following paintings done by the atelier. Here, bold strokes outline the sculpturesque body and expose the skeletal structure. The horse's coat has a brilliant sheen, as does the exuberant flow of its mane, which is highlighted by delicately curved lines scratched into the wet paint by Rubens with the wooden end of his brush. Even here Rubens never forgets his urge to compete with the ancient masters. The foam on the horse's mouth has been wiped on the canvas with a sponge, exactly as Pliny had described the method of the Greek painter Protogenes, who is said to have invented this curious technique. Despairing of ever painting lifelike foam, Protogenes angrily threw a sponge against the picture and ironically found that he had achieved his goal.

The horse's noble body has been traced to Titian and even to antique depictions. Rubens, however, distinguishes himself from all his forerunners in creating a living horse capable of sensing its companion's destiny. In this painting, the battle steed, though barely restraining its fighting spirit, seems to listen to its master's prayer, for like him it bows its head. Its grave look implies that the horse is aware of its great task—to bear its master to his death.

### *The Dismissal of the Lictors*

OIL ON CANVAS, 111<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 134<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (284 x 342 cm.)

LIVY RECOUNTS THAT “after the death prayer, Decius Mus told the lictors to go immediately to Titus Manlius and tell him that he had chosen to die for the good of the army. Then the consul, wrapped in a toga flung over his shoulder and fully armed, mounted his horse and plunged into the midst of the enemy.” Here again Rubens follows Livy's text closely except, as in the previous scene, for the reference to the battle. The figure of the consul, ready for combat and death, looms large. His head and helmet, shown in profile, are modeled after the Roman statue of Mars Ultor, which once stood in the temple of the same name in the Forum Augustus in Rome; this lost work was known in the seventeenth century only through copies and variants. The motif of mounting the horse, here indicating the hero's determination to meet his fate—the left leg planted on the ground expresses firmness in almost emblematic terms—was later repeated in reverse by Rubens around 1630 for his *Henry IV of France at the Siege of Amiens* (Konstmuseet, Göteborg). In that large unfinished canvas, which is part of the uncompleted cycle dedicated to the great French King, Rubens expressed the King's absolute determination to subdue his enemies by showing him mounting his horse. Unlike the representation of Henry IV, the present picture does not have a confident, triumphant tone. Instead, grief is revealed on the faces of the lictors, who carry fasces, the bundle of rods bound around an ax, which was the sign of the authority of the Roman magistrate. Leaving to fulfill the commander's order, the foremost lictor looks back at Decius Mus, whose arm—in the very center of the composition—is raised in a final salute. The somber mood of leave-taking is mirrored in the distant landscape, the only broadening view of the entire cycle. Rubens created this landscape from memories of his Italian sojourn, quoting the ruins of an ancient temple as a remote recollection of the cylindrical temple of Minerva Medica in Rome. The ruins, elegiac reminders of decayed greatness, reinforce the melancholy timbre of the scene.

In the rhythm of Rubens's narration of the story of Decius Mus, this painting pauses in quiet reflectiveness. Following the principles of dramatic art, such a respite is needed before the summit of the action is reached in the battle piece that follows. Besides serving as a dramatic

device, this meditative interval reveals the hero's state of mind. In the equanimity of his conduct, Decius Mus is here characterized by Rubens as an embodiment of the Roman ideal of virtue postulated by Stoicism. This philosophy, which found an important expression in the works of Seneca, was revived by the great Leyden scholar Justus Lipsius, the fatherly friend of Rubens. Guided by Lipsius, the artist was attracted to Stoicism throughout his life. Seneca and his followers had advocated mastery over emotions and passions, strength of mind, and imperturbability in the face of life's sorrows. These Stoical virtues sustain Decius Mus; while preparing himself for death, he carries out his official duties and gives his final commands. Unlike the grief-stricken lictors, who are not facing death, the doomed consul shows a calm detachment. In a similar way, Rubens honored the Stoic ideal of inner serenity in his painting of the dying Seneca (Alte Pinakothek, Munich). In 1584 Justus Lipsius published his influential *De constantia . . . in publicis malis*, in which he set forth his Neostoical philosophy. The essence of this teaching might apply to Decius Mus as well, who in the *publicum malum* (evil or calamity suffered by the people or state) of war and in the sight of death, exemplifies *constantia*, the firm determination so valued by Lipsius.

## *The Death of Decius Mus*

OIL ON CANVAS, 113<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 195<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (288 x 497 cm.)  
(without the later addition [6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.; 16 cm.] to the right side)

THE BATTLE BETWEEN the Romans and the Latins and the death of Decius Mus were fused by Rubens in this single monumental composition. This painting brings together various strands of action to demonstrate that the Romans faced defeat until the consul's sacrifice brought them brilliant victory. Against a background of attacking Romans and fleeing Latins, the main group of the painting towers with monumental sculptural power above a kind of pedestal composed of mortally wounded warriors. The bodies of horses are the pillars of Rubens's composition: framed by two brown horses, one already laid low and the other with hind legs kicking, the consul's dappled gray steed rears up in a regal levade. With this commanding posture, in which force is exerted against resistance, the battle reaches its peak. It was in just this way that Vergil describes the climax of an equestrian fight: "Straight up reared the steed, its hoofs whipping the air, and threw off its rider headlong" (*Aeneid* 10.892). And Vergil, drawing on the ancient appreciation of animals as possessing living souls, writes that such a fighting steed shed tears over its hero's death (11.90). Here the horse of Decius Mus seems imbued with the same mettle as its ancient Vergilian counterpart; its rearing motion and grave look express a spirit equal to its rider's and worthy of his virtue.

The roots of Rubens's ability to depict horses are found in Leonardo da Vinci. Roger de Piles, one of the earliest of Rubens's biographers, mentions a treatise by Rubens, since lost, in which the Flemish master stated that he had studied the notebooks of Leonardo in Arezzo and was greatly impressed by the thoroughness with which his great predecessor had mastered anatomy. Piles comments that "in describing the anatomy of the horse in particular, Rubens took into account the observations made by Leonardo and the drawings connected with them that he had likewise seen." But Rubens's debt to the art of Leonardo goes beyond their common interest in equine anatomy. It has long been recognized that in Rubens's scenes of mounted hunts and battles—and nowhere more than in this representation of the death of Decius Mus—he was following the example of Leonardo's famed *Battle of Anghiari*. Rubens could not have studied this

depiction of belligerent passion in its original state, since Leonardo's wall painting had perished soon after it was completed, but he was able to do a drawing (Louvre, Paris) that gives vivid evidence of the lost work, basing it on Leonardo's studies for the composition as well as copies of it made by others. The principle on which Leonardo had shaped his battle has obviously been absorbed in the present painting. Both depictions express the crucial points of the action through horses, which rise like cliffs above the slaughter around them. The similarity extends even to detail: in both representations the space below the horses' bodies is filled with fighting warriors of earthy brutality.

However, while Leonardo's composition depicted a bestial, frenzied rage—almost a single visual emblem of war—Rubens was concerned with the ethical implications of battle. Here the ideal of heroic self-sacrifice overrides the violent images of inhuman slaughter. This ideal is treated throughout the cycle with a steady growth of intensity; here it reaches its apotheosis—the manly sacrifice of the one for the many. The hero, who submits courageously to the will of the heavenly powers, meets his death with open eyes and transfigured countenance. And like a Christian martyr he catches sight of an opening heaven. In the oil sketch for this painting (Prado, Madrid), Rubens makes this allusion to martyrdom explicit; there an angelic genius descends and presents a laurel wreath and a palm branch as celestial prizes of victory to the dying consul. Rubens was not alone in putting forth this Christian interpretation; Augustine, the Early Christian philosopher, had presented Decius Mus as a shining example to Christians in his *City of God*. “What courageous Romans did for their worldly country, Christians will do far more willingly and joyfully for their heavenly one.” Even in the present large version, from which the allegorical elements of the sketch have been deleted, Rubens stresses the martyr-like death of his hero. The consul's head viewed obliquely from below—his eyes seeking the heavens, his mouth gaping more in one last breath of life than in any cry of complaint—is quoted by Rubens in a number of paintings of martyrs from around the same time. This motif—the head turned toward the light of heaven in a moment of deadly peril—can be traced to the *Dying Alexander*, a Hellenistic sculpture in Florence. This *exemplum doloris*, a model of pain and grief borne with greatness of soul, was used by Rubens to express a Stoical victory over the terrors of death; he did, however, infuse the ancient formula with a marked Christian spirit.

While Rubens usually follows Livy's text closely, it is interesting to note a deviation here in a significant detail. Livy stated explicitly that Decius Mus was shot by arrows, but in Rubens's painting he is killed by the thrust of a spear. The benefit of this change of weapon is obvious; the composition can now present the hero's death in a single concentrated image. Under the blow's full force the consul falls from his horse, and in a powerful diagonal the spear leads into the center of the composition, emphasizing the fatal wound. But this change expresses more than the painter's eye for an effective detail. Here Rubens appears to think in terms rather more Roman than even Livy. The *hasta*, a long and heavy spear, was an ancient Roman national weapon, sacred to Mars, the god of war, and revered in his temple on the Palatine in Rome. A symbol of Mars himself, the *hasta* would be venerated, even worshiped, in the god's name. Taking this Roman belief into account, Decius Mus consecrates his death to the god of war, who—in the wording of the sacrificial language passed down by Livy—accepts this heroic offer of Roman virtue with delight.

## *The Obsequies of Decius Mus*

OIL ON CANVAS, 114<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 183<sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (290 x 465 cm.)

(without the later addition [6<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in.; 17 cm.] to both the right and left sides)

LIVY RECOUNTS THAT the body of Decius Mus could not be recovered after the battle because night fell and shrouded the searching Romans in darkness. The next day his body was discovered in the tallest heap of slain foes; his co-consul ordered funeral rites of a solemnity befitting such a heroic death. Since Livy does not describe the details of the ceremonies, Rubens drew on his own antiquarian knowledge in presenting the dead consul's lying in state as a somber ritual of victory celebration. Now the figure of Titus Manlius, Decius's co-consul, appears for the first time in the cycle; according to Livy's report, he arranges the last tribute to his dead comrade. A *tropaeum* (a memorial of captured weapons, standards, and severed heads) has been erected, and martial music is being played on tubas while soldiers cut down foliage and branches for the funeral pyre. Booty is carried in and gold and silver are heaped up in splendid vessels. Bound prisoners cringe beneath the heavy hand of their conquerors; a captive woman is dragged forward weeping, her children clinging desperately to her. Rubens borrowed this motif of cruel mercy toward the enemy from the Gemma Augustea, a precious cameo that presents Roman imperial iconography in its most classical terms. This work, from which he took his authentic image of a Roman victory celebration, had been studied by Rubens from a cast and recorded in a drawing (St. Annen-Museum, Lübeck).

The center of the present work is again occupied by the cycle's hero; he is the pivot of both the celebration and the suffering. The dead consul, his head wreathed with laurel, lies in state on a sumptuously carved and gilded bier. As in the previous scenes of the drama, Decius Mus is once again distinguished by his red toga. The flamelike color of this garment, a leitmotif through the entire cycle, alludes not only to the doomed hero's consular dignity but also to his bloody sacrifice. Jakob Burckhardt, one of the most perceptive commentators on Rubens's art, wrote in 1898: "The homage to the dead body is a most sublime moment whose impression is not sweetened by any generous ruefulness: these are victors and Romans." And he sums up the message of the entire cycle: "In these pictures there lives a powerful and unaffected feeling for Roman grandeur such as David and his Neoclassicist imitators, for all their pathos, never attained."

## *Victoria and Virtus*

OIL ON CANVAS, 113 x 106<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (287 x 271.5 cm.)

SINCE THE FIRST printed catalogue of the Liechtenstein Gallery (1767), this painting, unanimously called *Triumphant Roma*, has been regarded as the concluding work of the Decius Mus cycle. Accordingly, Victoria, the winged goddess of victory, was said to be offering a laurel wreath to Roma, the armed goddess of the Roman capital, identified by the helmet, shortsword, and lance; an Amazon-like figure, she places her foot on the globe to indicate her worldwide rule. This interpretation cannot, however, be accepted here. The two figures appear to face each other, but in actual fact the painting is a combined cartoon for two separate tapestry hangings, each depicting a single figure. The contract, dated November 9, 1616, in which Jan Raes and Franco Cattaneo agreed to weave the Decius Mus tapestry cycle, refers not only to the main pieces but also to three such narrow hangings. These were not intended to advance the narrative

action of the Decius Mus cycle; instead, in commenting on the main theme, they provide a kind of pictorial annotation. It might therefore be expected that both female personifications here are used more to express praise of the consul's heroic feat than to serve as a general reference to Rome. In fact, various representations by Rubens and his predecessors indicate that the figure of Virtus, the embodiment of military virtue, is being depicted here, rather than the goddess Roma. Together, the figures of Victoria and Virtus denote the two qualities that inform the deed of Decius Mus: it was the Roman virtue of this man that gave victory to Rome.

## *The Trophy*

OIL ON CANVAS, 113<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 49<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (289 x 126 cm.)

IN ROMAN TIMES the *tropaeum*, a trophy of weapons seized from the vanquished enemy, was erected as a monument of victory, usually on the battlefield itself. According to Roman custom, Rubens shows arms, armor, standards, and even the severed and pierced head of an enemy piled on the ground and attached in a colorful arrangement to the stump of a tree. Gold taken as booty is heaped in precious vessels in front of the *tropaeum*. This painting served as a cartoon for an *entre-fenêtre*, a narrow tapestry hanging that complemented the sequence narrating the story of Decius Mus. Like its companion piece, the representation of Victoria and Virtus, it was entirely executed by the master's atelier, although the design was certainly produced by Rubens himself.

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*Decius Mus Relating His Dream*

















*The Interpretation of the Victim*























*The Consecration of Decius Mus*



















*The Dismissal of the Lictors*















*The Death of Decius Mus*























*The Obsequies of Decius Mus*



















*Victoria and Virtus*



*The Trophy*





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