

The Return of the Holy Family from Egypt

The Return of the Holy Family from Egypt was painted Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) as a pendant for Flight into Egypt for the chapel of St. Joseph in the Jesuit Church in Antwerp in 1618. It was the gift of Antwerp's mayor Nicolaas Rockox.

The theme was chosen because of the desire to emphasise important events in the life of St. Joseph. It depicts Our Lady, St. Joseph and the child Jesus in a dense landscape. The composition emphasises St. Joseph's role as protector, foster father and guardian of the infant Jesus.

The picture remained in the church until the dissolution of the Jesuits in 1777 when it was sold to an art dealer and eventually made its way into the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1871. It remained until 2012 when it was purchased by the parish of St Charles Borromeo in Antwerp and re-installed in the chapel of St. Joseph for which it had been painted.

The copy which was recently acquired by this parish came from the Convent of Mercy in Newry, Co. Down. It was painted sometime in the late 17th/early 18th. century. The picture is not copied directly from the original painting (where the motion goes from right to left) but from a print made about 1620 by Lucas Vosterman (where the motion goes from left to right). Another version of the subject, also painted by Rubens, hangs in the collection of the Earl of Leicester at Holkham Hall in Norfolk. Painted in 1621 by Giovanni Francesco Barbieri (1591-1666), nicknamed Il Guercino because of his squint, on commission from Bartolomeo Fabri (1582-1646), a prominent nobleman from Cento, as a pendant for another picture, The Taking of Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (currently in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge). Both subjects had been painted twenty years earlier by Caravaggio whose work much influenced Guercino.