



Fox Hunting scene" by Paul de Vos

Fox hunting scene

Paul de Vos with the assistance of Jan Wildens

Circa 1637

Oil on canvas

204 /242cm

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Description

Fox Hunting scene by Paul de Vos : allegory of Aristocracy, power and force

Carlos Herrero Starkie

We are faced with a magnificent pictorial example of aristocratic Flemish taste from the 17th century, a masterpiece by Paul de Vos that depicts the outcome of a hunting scene in which a pack of seven greyhounds corners two foxes, surprised while killing a rooster. The immediacy of the scene and the rhythm of the narrative create a composition of tremendous dramatic intensity with an allegorical character that can be contextualized in the struggle for Habsburg hegemony in the Netherlands. Nonetheless, it fulfills the aesthetic standards of the time in Flanders, marked by the preference for grandeur and the monumentality of large formats.

Prior to 1781, this work likely formed a pair or belonged to the same series as the beautiful "Fox Hunting Scene," preserved in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna since its founding (inventory number 707) (Fig. 2). Another painting that could also be assigned to the same series is "Running Fox" at present in the Prado Museum, bearing in mind its similar iconography and style (Fig. 3). Both paintings belong to the same artistic period of Paul de Vos, circa 1637. They feature a pair of foxes and greyhounds immersed in a similar landscape, possibly painted by the hand of Jan Wildens. Furthermore, both canvases have identical dimensions (204 x 242cm) and show an original additional section of equal size added to the top of the canvas. There are known contemporary replicas of inferior quality without this addition, such as the one in the Bruxelle Belfius Bank (inventory no. 1051) and the one that appeared in the Bukowski auctions in April 1945 and June 2011. All these factors suggest a common historical provenance, predating 1781, likely related to one of the old Spanish collections. This hypothesis aligns with the historical fact that the Austrian imperial troops looted the main art collections of the palaces in Madrid in 1706, supporting a Spanish origin for the painting at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. Additionally, the provenance of our painting, belonging to the collection of the Marquess of Acapulco, a title bestowed in 1758 by Philip V on the Messia de la Cerda y Valdivia family, whose lineage is linked to the most illustrious Spanish aristocratic families, further reinforces this likely scenario.

The excellent pictorial execution of the work corresponds to the finest period of Paul de Vos in the late 1630s when his painting achieved a more personal maturity characterized by opaque and subdued tones. The artistic significance of the commission, a serialized narrative, and its Spanish provenance suggest that it may be one of the 17 works by Paul de Vos sold at the auction of the Duke of Aschoot's estate in Madrid 1641. Most of these works were acquired by the Marquess of Leganés, later gifted to the King for the Alcázar, the Buen Retiro Palace, and the Torre de Parada.

Alternatively, it could be one of the 60 hunting scenes referred to in the letters from the Cardinal Infante to Philip IV, dated 1636. In fact, the inventory of the Torre de Parada in 1701 includes a catalog entry for "a running fox by Paul de Vos," currently at the Prado Museum, with a landscape very similar to the one represented in our painting and the background of the Vienna Museum, suggesting they may belong to the same series (Fig. 3). However, the specific identification of our work in the inventories after 1700 of the royal collections is challenging due to distortions caused by the looting by Austrian troops in 1706

and the fire of the Alcázar in 1738. Although paintings of foxes and animal hunts are cataloged with attributions to Paul de Vos, Snyders, or simply anonymous, their descriptions are often confused and brief.

In Flanders, Johannes Stradanus supplies this aristocratic clientele, which is already determined to present hunting as a prerogative of the nobility, to be practiced following an ethical code, without firearms and solely with the help of a pack of dogs. This serves as the closest precedent to the flourishing of this theme, which Rubens inaugurates in 1615 with his monumental hunting scenes, culminating in the 1628/1638, decade with numerous commissions from Philip IV for his palaces, promoted by Habsburg propaganda seeking to identify the king with the "Hispanic Hercules." In hunting scenes, Rubens finds a unique opportunity to create paintings brimming with movement, energy, and expressiveness, focusing on the description of the moment of maximum dramatic action when the hunters corner their prey (Fig. 6, 7). These new iconographic models would later be used by Snyders and Paul de Vos to shape a new pictorial genre characterized by hounds and prey as the sole protagonists of the work.

Hunting scenes, representing aristocratic values and being a daily activity of the nobility, are recurrent though not frequent in 15th and 16th-century painting. We all recall the beautiful hunting scene in the forest by Paolo Uccello, 1468 (Fig. 4) and the tapestries from the Brussels workshop, commissioned in 1525 by Charles V as a gift to Francis I, depicting Maximilian hunting (Fig. 5). However, it is only in the late 16th century that an increasing demand for hunting paintings and prints begins to emerge.

Benefitting from the genius of Rubens, who revolutionized the artistic sphere of Antwerp and without whose pictorial resources they could not have emerged, both Snyders and Paul de Vos established themselves with great success in a specialty that captivated the aristocracy close to the governors of the Low Countries. It represented an aesthetic related to dominance through force, the dramatic nature of animal life, and violence understood as the survival of the fittest, where each animal has a predetermined role of predator or prey from which they cannot escape, bearing these themes evident political and philosophical connotations. This new genre undoubtedly represents one of the great innovations of Flemish painting in the 17th century. The large format of their paintings, the prominence of the foreground in capturing the viewer's attention, the tremendous dynamism emanating from all their compositions, and the contorted expressions of their animals bestow a cinematic approach upon this type of painting. Action dominates the scene, and the sequential narrative culminates in a predetermined dramatic resolution.

"Vénerie" with Alexandre François Desportes and Jean Baptiste Oudry as its main exponents, Jan Weenix in the Netherlands, in Spain with Goya and in England with John Stubbs.

Snyders, Rubens' assistant in the execution of many of his animal paintings, and especially his brother-in-law Paul de Vos, who also occasionally worked for Rubens, became increasingly independent and autonomous while always retaining the master's stereotypes and models as resources to achieve that striking impact on the viewer (Fig 8). Snyders, closest to Rubens, is distinguished by the careful anatomy of his animals and the Rubensian color palette of his paintings (Fig. 10, 11, 12), while Paul de Vos is known for the sense of frenetic movement he imparts to his greyhounds, his more ochre color palette, and his more impressionistic technique, which endows his animals with a morphology devoid of articulations and bones (Fig. 9). If Snyders is more interested in painting the animal world as an entity, showcasing its beauty, strength, and musculature, Paul de Vos is inclined to show them in motion, stretching their forms as if action decomposes matter, creating a new visual reality of immediacy and surprise. According to a comment by Prof. Matías Díaz Padrón, "De Vos dogs are more stylized, agile, and dynamic than those of Snyders from that period, 1637-40" (Fig. 13, 18, 19). Both achieved success during their lifetime, as evidenced by the grand houses they lived in and the numerous properties they left in their wills. Their artistic significance was great because they knew how to interpret Rubens' pictorial genius to create a new genre focused exclusively on animals, their psychology, and instinctive reactions, symbolizing like no other genre the warrior values of the time. Their influence transcended geographical and temporal boundaries, serving as an immediate precedent for the French genre of.

As Susan Koslow indicates, it is almost certain that this work is a collaboration between Paul de Vos, who painted the animals, and Jan Wildens, who created the landscape characterized by the resources

usually employed by this frequent collaborator of Rubens: a leaden sky with transparent clouds and a plain interspersed with trees and backlit logs. It is likely that a third artist painted the dead rooster, which could be the work of Snyders or Paul de Vos himself (Fig. 23).

The series to which our painting belongs narrates the pursuit of two foxes by several greyhounds after they have killed a rooster. The foxes are surprised by the dogs in the painting at the Kunsthistorisches Museum (Fig. 2), with one fox defying the chestnut-colored dog that appears injured in our painting (Fig. 28, 29), and the other, with chocolate-colored patches, also defeated (Fig. 25). The climax of the chase is expressed dramatically in our painting, where one fox, after successfully confronting two dogs, is subdued by the larger and grayer hound, whose head only appears in the painting at the Kunsthistorisches Museum. However, here, it spectacularly becomes the main protagonist and victor: the Hispanic Hercules.

The work at hand encompasses all the characteristics to be considered an iconic piece by Paul de Vos, as it embodies all the attributes one would expect to see in one of his hunting scenes.

The other fox, who seemed able to escape and secure its retreat in the plain, is intercepted by the dark brown-coated dog with a white neck and other new actors who appear as if in a flash before the imminent outcome (Fig. 27). Among them is a superb white black-spotted hound, tremendously athletic, which stretches out in a typical pose in Paul de Vos hunting scenes (Fig. 22), and surprisingly is about to catch the other fox by its back, as the cornered fox adopts the typical defiant prey posture that its companion had in our painting before perishing at the hands of the Hercules dog.

The masterful character of this work lies in the way the painter composes the scene, obsessed with conveying a sense of immediacy and a fierce rhythm, eminently Rubensian, keeping the viewer's attention on the two main dogs positioned in the center of the composition, both in a predatory attitude facing the two foxes in a defensive position (Fig. 35). All of this is in perfect synchrony with the four other dogs that collaborate, lurking as mere extras, and the two others that fall defeated, one of them next to the dead rooster, the origin of the pursuit.

The scene links models and employs a canine bodily symbolism characteristic of Paul de Vos and Snyders, derived ultimately from Rubens. The painter selects the morphology of the dog according to the role assigned to them in the scene. The dominating attitude of the Hercules Dog is also found in several masterful scenes by Snyders and Rubens (Fig. 10, 12, 32, 33, 35). The dog that stretches out its stride, along with its entire body, to reach the prey is undoubtedly a hallmark of Paul de Vos (Fig. 13, 18, 19, 22). Both protagonists are characterized by an intimidating long snout, typical of predators (Fig. 31). On the other hand, the wounded or defeated dog has a flatter snout typical of Spaniel Bretons (Fig. 25, 29). We find these images in several paintings by Paul de Vos and Snyders. Finally, the importance given by the master to the collars of the attacking dogs, but not to the defeated ones, all of them showing an extreme pictorial quality symbolizes the domestic nature of the dogs, ultimately expressing the presence of the human and royal spirit as the ultimate ruler in the narrative (Fig. 31, 32, 33, 34). In short, the dogs, although acting like wild beasts, do so under human, divine, or royal command, suggesting a certain control of force.

Those who hold power, unveiling the dramatic outcome that awaits those who attempt to challenge the authority of the ruler.

We would like to thank Prof. Susan Coslow, Dr. Matías Díaz Padrón, and Dr. Gerlinde Gruber from the Kunsthistorisches Museum, for their assistance in cataloging this artwork.

The decorative character of the work, accentuated by its large size, suitable for hanging at a great height, does not diminish its allegorical side, which is fully Rubensian, highly intellectual and philosophical. Its message reveals a moral that aims to dignify the use of force and war by.

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