THE LEIDEN COLLECTION



Golden Age

Jan Brueghel the Younger and Circle of Peter Paul Rubens
(Antwerp 1601 – 1678 Antwerp)

ca. 1625
oil on panel
38 x 59.2 cm
JB-100

How to cite

Rahusen, Henriette. “Golden Age” (2017). In *The Leiden Collection Catalogue*, 4th ed. Edited by Arthur K. Wheelock Jr. and Elizabeth Nogrady with Caroline Van Cauwenberge. New York, 2023–. https://theleidencollection.com/artwork/satyrs-nymphs-putti-and-leopards-in-a-landscape/ (accessed November 15, 2026).

A PDF of every version of this entry is available in this Online Catalogue's Archive, and the Archive is managed by a permanent URL. New versions are added only when a substantive change to the narrative occurs.

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

In an idyllic scene at the edge of a forest, a satyr teasingly backs away from a nymph who reaches for the grapes in his hands. Two small boys in the center of the triangular composition romp blithely with three majestic leopards. Resting an arm on the neck of one of the beasts, the boy at the right gestures toward the nymph while the second boy—echoing the satyr's gesture—teases the central leopard with another bunch of grapes. The playful interactions between the mythological figures, the children, and the leopards project a world of harmonious coexistence evocative of the mythological Golden Age. Popularized in western Europe by Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (written in 7 A.D.), the Golden Age was celebrated for being the only one of mankind's four ages in which nature and reason were in perfect harmony and humans were inherently good: "The Golden Age was first; when Man, yet new, no rule but uncorrupted Reason knew: And, with a native bent, did good pursue. Unforc'd by punishment, un-aw'd by fear."[1]

Ovid's *Metamorphoses* provided Dutch and Flemish artists with an almost endless source of subjects for history paintings, but none more than Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). Combining the lives of gods, goddesses, and mythological creatures with the observed natural world around him, Rubens's realistic depictions of animals brought Greek mythology into a naturalistic setting that the viewer could understand. Rubens, largely inspired by Ovid, painted various images of the Golden Age, including *Nymph and Satyr with Leopards*, ca. 1618, a large canvas that he sold to Sir Dudley Carleton as part of an exchange for the latter's collection of antiquities.[2] The identification of this composition as an allegory of the Golden Age was already noted in 1793, when Rubens's original painting—or another version of it—was in the collection of the Duc d'Orleans **(fig 1)**.[3]

The Leiden Collection panel is a reduced copy of that composition. Rubens's composition is seen hanging on a wall in Jan Brueghel the Elder's *Allegory of Sight and Smell*, ca. 1620, in the Prado **(fig 2)**. The Prado work indicates that Rubens's composition had more foliage and a greater expanse of sky above the satyr's head than the copy in the Leiden Collection, and a technical examination has revealed that the latter panel has been trimmed at the top.[4]

The Leiden Collection painting is the result of collaboration between at least two artists. The three stunningly lifelike leopards and the landscape may well be the work of Jan Brueghel the Younger (1601–78). The leopards are based on models found in the paintings of his father Jan Brueghel the Elder (1568–1625), which, in turn, were based on animal studies by Rubens. The central leopard, for example, is found in the famous *Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man*, ca. 1615, which Jan the Elder painted in collaboration with Rubens **(fig 3)**. The head-butting leopard on the left appears in

Comparative Figures

Fig 1. After Maarten de Vos, *Pan et Syrinx*, 1787, etching and engraving, 41.6 x 29.9 cm, The British Museum, inv. 1855,0609.490, © Trustees of the British Museum

Fig 2. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *Sight and Smell* (detail), ca. 1620, oil on canvas, 176 x 264 cm, Museo del Prado, Madrid, inv. P01403

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

Jan the Elder's vivid depiction of *The Entry of the Animals into Noah's Ark*, 1613 **(fig 4)**. The nymph, satyr, and the two boys were executed by a different hand, presumably someone trained in Rubens's workshop. When this painting entered the Leiden Collection in 2005, these figures were attributed to Jan Boeckhorst (1604–68), but his figures have a very different character than those in this work.[5] The broadly executed landscape may have been painted by an entirely different artist. Both Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder had large workshops that reproduced replicas of the masters' works, and identifying individual hands in such paintings has proven to be extremely difficult.

Fig 3. Jan Brueghel the Elder and Peter Paul Rubens, *The Garden of Eden with the Fall of Man*, ca. 1617, oil on panel, 74.3 x 114.7 cm, Royal Pictures Gallery Mauritshuis, The Hague, inv. 253

- Henriette Rahusen, 2017

Fig 4. Jan Brueghel the Elder, *The Entry of the Animals into Noah's Ark*, 1613, oil on panel, 54.61 x 83.82 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, inv. 92.PB.82

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

Endnotes

1. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Sir Samuel Garth et al. (London, 1717), Book 1: 89–93 and 107–16. The tree against which the satyr is pressed may stand for the tree of Jove, which yielded its acorns in an era of unlimited plenty: "The teeming Earth, yet guiltless of the plough / And unprovok'd, did fruitful stores allow: / Content with food, which Nature freely bred / On wildings and on strawberries [mankind] fed; / Cornels and bramble-berries gave the rest / And falling acorns furnish'd out a feast!"
2. In 1618, Rubens sent Carleton a list of the paintings available in his studio, including this description of the nine-by-eleven-foot composition: "Leopards done from nature, with satyrs and nymphs, original by my hand except a beautiful landscape done by the hand of a capable specialist in this field." See Julius S. Held. "Rubens's Leopards—A Milestone in the Portrayal of Wild Animals," *M: Quarterly Review of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* 7, no. 3 (1975): 5. When planned for exhibition at the 1953 Winter Exhibition of the Royal Academy of Arts in London, the Leiden Collection painting was attributed to Peter Paul Rubens. On 1 June 1990, it was sold at Sotheby's New York as a work by Jan Brueghel the Elder.
3. An exhibition catalogue of the Duc d'Orleans's collection described Rubens's composition as "symbolical of the Golden Age." *The Orleans Gallery, now exhibiting, at the Great Rooms, late the Royal Academy, No. 125, Pall Mall, April 1793* (London, 1793), 18. The Orleans composition was at that point attributed to Antwerp artist Martin de Vos (1532–1603). Quoted Julius S. Held. "Rubens's Leopards—A Milestone in the Portrayal of Wild Animals" in *M: Quarterly Review of the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts* 7, no. 3 (1975): 7 n. 6.

   The description of the Orleans Collection is taken from the curator's comments on the British Museum website for inv. 1837,0408.317: "From 'Galerie du Palais Royal,' a set reproducing 354 works from the collection of the Duke of Orléans, published by Jacques Couché . . . from 1786 to 1808. The plates were issued by series of 6, every 3 months, and each of them was accompanied by a text, engraved on the same plate as the reproduction; the first six plates were published on 15 February 1786 and advertised in 'Affiches, Annonce et Avis divers,' 25 February. . . . [The Galerie du Palais Royal] is also sometimes referred to as 'Galerie du Palais d'Orléans,' or 'Galerie du Duc d'Orléans.'"
4. Apart from this panel, several other workshop copies of the composition exist in a range of sizes.
5. Auction catalogue, Koller Zurich, 21 September 2005, Sale A134, Lot 3042, with notes by Dr. Klaus Ertz, who dated the painting ca. 1626 and assigned authorship of the figures to Boeckhorst.

Provenance

- The Honorable Mrs. Saumarez, Coddenham, Suffolk, by 1953, as by Peter Paul Rubens.[1]

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

- (Sale, Sotheby's, New York, 1 June 1990, as by Jan Brueghel the Younger).
- Private collection (sale, Koller, Zurich, 21 September 2005, no. 3042, as by Jan Brueghel the Younger and Jan Boeckhorst [Salomon Lilian B. V., Amsterdam, 2005]).
- From whom acquired by the present owner in 2005.

Provenance Notes

1. This provenance is based on a label affixed to the verso of the panel: "Royal Academy of Art Winter Exhibition, 1953. Flemish Pictures. / Artist: Attrib. Rubens / Title: The Golden Age / Name and Address of Owner: The Hon. Mrs. Saumarez, Shrubland Park, Codenham, Suffolk." Sincere thanks to Andrew Potter, research assistant at the Royal Academy Library, who communicated to Nicole Cook, curatorial assistant at the Leiden Collection, on 24 July 2014 that while records indicate that the painting was originally intended to be shown in the 1953 Winter Exhibition, it was ultimately not included due to discrepancies over its transport.

Versions
Versions and Copies

1. After Peter Paul Rubens, *The Leopards*, oil on canvas, 255 x 317 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, inv. no. 1975.15, as by Rubens until 1992.
2. After Peter Paul Rubens, *Nymph, Satyr, Two Children, and Playful Leopards in a Landscape*, oil on panel, 70 x 53 cm, Musée Jeanne-d'Aboville, La Fère, previously as by Maerten de Vos.
3. After Peter Paul Rubens, *Leopards in a Landscape with a Nymph, a Satyr, and Two Putti*, oil on linen, 168.6 x 209.6 cm, current whereabouts unknown; sale, London, Christie's, 4 July 1991, no. 508.
4. After Peter Paul Rubens, *Leopards with a Satyr and Nymph*, oil on panel, 48.7 x 64.2 cm, current whereabouts unknown; sale, New York, Christie's, 26 February 1997, no. 77.
5. Circle of Peter Paul Rubens, *Eine Nymph emit Satyr, zwei Kindern und leoparden in einer bewaldeten Flussandschaft*, oil on wood, 48 x 64 cm, current whereabouts unknown; sale, Vienna, Dorotheum, 29 September 2004, no. 148.
6. Follower of Peter Paul Rubens, *Leopards avec satyre et nymphe*, tempera on vellum paid on panel, 21 x 27.5 cm, current whereabouts unknown; sale, Paris, Ferri, 15 June 2007, no. 23.

Related Drawings and Prints

© 2026 The Leiden Collection

1. Wenceslaus Hollar (1607–77), *Three Leopards and Two Boys*, ca. 1640s, partial copy after *The Leopards* by Rubens, etching, 14 x 21 cm, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1920, 20.81.3.327.
2. Antoine Borel (1743–1810), copy after *The Leopards* by Rubens, ca. 1787, drawing, dimensions unknown, Paris, The Jacques Doucet Literary Library.
3. Charles-Nicolas Varin (1741–1812), copy after design by Antoine Borel, mistakenly inscribed as "Pan et Syrinx" after a painting by Martin de Vos, 1787, etching and engraving, 41.6 x 29.9 cm, London, British Museum, inv. no. 1855,0609.490. From *Galerie du Palais Royal: gravée d'après les tableaux des differentes ecoles qui la composent: avec un abrégé de la vie des peintres & une description historique de chaque tableau par M.r l'Abbé de Fontenai…*, 3 vols. (Paris, 1786–1808).

Technical Summary

The support, a single, rectangular plank of horizontally grained oak, has bevels on all four sides.[1] The upper bevel is narrower than the others, and the satyr's head appears to have been cropped, which suggests the upper panel edge may have been trimmed. The panel is unthinned and uncradled, and has no machine tool marks. Triangular wood inserts have been added to the lower left and upper left and right corners, and a narrow shim has been glued to the upper edge. The panel has a paper label and a handwritten inscription, but no wax collection seals, import stamps, stencils or panel maker's marks.

A light-colored ground has been thinly and evenly applied with parallel, diagonally oriented brushstrokes and extends onto the lower panel edge. The paint has been applied smoothly and opaquely. In the current format, the satyr's head appears to be cropped by ca. 1 cm.

The painting is unsigned and undated.

No underdrawing is readily apparent in infrared images captured at 780–1000 nanometers. Minor compositional changes noted in the images and X-radiograph include additional folds that originally defined the nymph's drapery.

The painting has not undergone conservation treatment since its acquisition in 2005 and remains in a good state of preservation.

Technical Summary Endnotes

1. The characterization of the wood is based on visual examination only.

© 2026 The Leiden Collection