



SEBASTIAEN VRANCX

(Antwerp 1573 - 1647)

DRAWINGS FROM VIRGIL'S AENEID



SEBASTIAEN VRANCX (Antwerp 1573 - 1647) was an important baroque painter and draughtsman of the first half of the seventeenth century. After his training in the workshop of Adam van Noort, who also trained others, such as Peter Paul Rubens, he travelled to Italy around 1597, where he met the famous landscape painter Paul Bril. After his return to Antwerp, he established himself as a painter, foremost of cavalry and battle scenes and village plunderings. However, research has shown that he successfully pursued other activities as well. Not only was Vrancx an engraver; as a leading member of

De Violieren, the well-known Antwerp Chamber of Rhetoric, he was also a respected writer. Around 1615, someone in the Chamber took on the task of writing a new Dutch translation of Virgil's epic poem, the *Aeneid*. Whether or not Vrancx himself was the translator has been much debated; what is certain, however, is that he illustrated this new translation, which, for unknown reasons, remained unpublished at the time. At least sixty-five drawings from this series (which may once have featured in Rubens' art collection, since some of Vrancx' drawings quite possibly served as sources for several of Rubens' oil sketches) are known to exist; six are in museums, such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the Fogg Art Museum (Cambridge), the other fifty-nine were all in a private collection, which was sold at Drouot (Paris) in 1981. The present series of drawings, hitherto unpublished, has recently been rediscovered. They illustrate several key scenes from the epic story of Aeneas' journey. With visible pleasure, Vrancx shows his considerable skill as a draughtsman in these delightful depictions of Olympic Gods, battle scenes and hunting episodes, dedicated to that greatest of Roman authors, Virgil.

Aeneas hunting after the landing in Africa

(Book I, verse 157 - 222)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper

115 x 157 mm

Fleeing Troy after being defeated by the Greeks, Aeneas and his fellow Trojans set sail for Italy. Juno, fearing for her beloved city of Carthage (which fate had foretold would fall to the descendants of the Trojans, the Romans) tries to delay them by having Aeolus, god of the winds, stir up a storm. After Neptunus has calmed the seas, the Trojans land in Africa. Aeneas reconnoitres and shoots seven stags, which heartens his men after the loss of several ships in the storm.

Aeneas is shown in the foreground, shooting one stag, while another tries to run away. Behind Aeneas, two Trojans are carrying off another hunting trophy, while on the left a third is skinning a deer. In the background, some of Aeneas' men have lit a fire to prepare for the feast on the beach, having dragged some of their ships ashore.



**Venus complains to Jupiter on behalf of her son;
Jupiter sends Mercury to Dido, queen of the Carthaginians**
(Book I, verse 223 - 296; verse 297 - 304)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

Venus, having witnessed the storm killing several Trojans and throwing her son, Aeneas, off course, and fearing that his destiny will not be fulfilled, asks Jupiter to intervene. Jupiter assures Venus that the Trojans' fate will be fulfilled and sends Mercury, the divine messenger, to Dido, queen of the Carthaginians, to ensure that the Trojans will be well received by her.

All the gods are presented with their traditional attributes, which makes the scene very visible: Venus with her son Amor next to her to the left, Jupiter, accompanied by his eagle and holding several lightning bolts, at the center and Mercury, with his winged helmet and feet, to the right.



Venus shows Aeneas and Achates the way to Carthage
(Book I, verse 305 - 417)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

Aeneas, accompanied by his loyal friend and arms-bearer Achates, meets his mother Venus, disguised as a huntress. She tells them the story of queen Dido and the city of Carthage, and when she asks them for their story, Aeneas in turn complains of his ill fortune. Venus shows the men the way to Carthage and hides them in a cloud, so they can enter the city unseen.

Achates, bearing Aeneas' weaponry, is shown to the left, while the latter talks to Venus, who is, unbeknownst to him, his mother. Venus points towards the distance, in the direction of the city of Carthage. Two Carthaginian soldiers are standing guard on a hilltop, overlooking the valley.



**The storm;
Dido and Aeneas' union in the cave**
(Book IV, verse 129 - 172)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

Dido throws a welcoming banquet for Aeneas, who tells her the story of his seven-year wanderings, starting with the fall of Troy (Books II and III). That night, Venus arranges for her son Amor to get Dido to fall in love with Aeneas. Aided by Juno, who is hoping for an alliance between Trojans and Carthaginians, she devises a plan. When Dido organises a hunt in honour of Aeneas, Juno sends a storm to break up the hunting party; Dido and Aeneas are forced to seek shelter in a cave, where they make love.

Surprised and scared by the sudden heavy downpour and lightning bolts, the hunters flee in all directions. The trees are being swept violently by strong winds. To the right, in the background, Aeneas and Dido sit huddled together in the cave, sheltered from the storm.



**Fama tells the world of the union between Dido and Aeneas;
Jupiter sends Mercury to Aeneas**
(Book IV, verse 173 - 218; verse 219 - 237)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

Fama, the personification of Rumour, maliciously spreads the story of the love union between Dido and Aeneas, which ends up reaching the ears of Dido's suitor King Iarbas. Feeling rejected and angry, the latter prays to Jupiter asking him whether the gods know and approve of this disgraceful situation. Jupiter sends Mercury to Aeneas to order him to sail away from Carthage immediately, and thus fulfill his destiny. Aeneas - reluctantly - obeys and Dido kills herself out of grief.

While Iarbas, having heard the news from Fama who is floating above, is praying at the altar below, Jupiter, to the left, is sending Mercury on his way.



**Ascanius kills Silvia's stag;
The fight between Latin herdsmen and Trojans**
(Book VII, verse 475 - 510; verse 511 - 571)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

After a stop in Sicily, where they hold games in honour of Aeneas' deceased father Anchises (Book V), the Trojans reach Italy, where Aeneas, helped by the Sybil, visits his father in the underworld (Book VI). Having reached the Tiber, the Trojans then meet with king Latinus, who arranges for a wedding between his daughter Lavinia and Aeneas. Juno, who does not favour this union, asks one of the Erinyes, Alecto, to intervene.

Alecto, wearing a crown of snakes, depicted next to Juno (identifiable by her peacock) in the upper left corner, incites the Trojan hunting hounds to chase the stag belonging to Silvia, sister of one of the Latin king's herdsmen. Unaware that it is a pet, Aeneas' son Ascanius shoots the animal. Enraged, the Latin herdsmen attack the Trojans. Thus begins the Latin-Trojan war.



The council of the Olympic Gods
(Book X, verse 1 - 162)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper
115 x 157 mm

At the start of the war, Aeneas sets off to seek local allies (Book VIII). While he is gone, the Latins, lead by Turnus, leader of the Rutulians, attack the Trojans (Book IX). To stop the slaughter, Jupiter calls for a council of the gods, urging them to stop meddling in the affairs of the Latins and the Trojans. Venus, siding with the Trojans, and Juno, siding with the Latins, each try to get Jupiter on their side, but he refuses, saying fate must decide.

The assembly of the gods is shown with such detail that they can almost all be identified. Beneath the quarreling gods, in the middle, Latin and Trojan soldiers clash, between the Latin tents to the left and the Trojan camp to the right. At large, several ships are afloat: Aeneas is returning with an allied contingent of Etruscan forces, led by their king, Tarchon.



Jupiter and Juno discuss the fate of the Latins and the Trojans

(Book XII, verse 791 - 842)

brown ink and wash on traces of black pencil on paper

115 x 157 mm

On the Olympus, Jupiter asks Juno to stop interfering in the conflict between Latins and the Trojans, and to stop acting against the Trojans. She yields to his will, but requests that the Latins not be forced to become Trojans, and that Rome may become great thanks to Italian values. Jupiter agrees. Beneath them, the fighting rages on; Aeneas kills the Latin leader Turnus, thus in one fell swoop putting an end to the conflict as well as to the story of the *Aeneid*.



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