Aristotle’s standard of excellence establishes an object as “good” when it possesses the highest degree possible those characteristics which distinguish its kind from all others. By this test the new Rubens, Atalanta and Meleager, bought by the Museum last winter, so fully and vividly imbued with all that is implied by the phrase “a Rubens,” is a very good example indeed of that painter’s work. Glowing color, richly ample forms, smooth, bright expanses of enticing flesh, the sheen of healthy hair, and the moist brightness of lively eyes and lips are all here, plus a wealth of variety in textures of furs and silks and metals and romantic drama in the contrast of shadowy blue background, which serves as foil for the shining gleam that spotlights the main actors.

To admirers of Rubens who know only his mature and late works, there is in the earliest paintings, especially those made in Italy or just after his return to the Netherlands, a shocking brutality and coarseness. The color, lacking the later harmonies and nuances, seems to them too raw, and the timbre of his lush and vigorous utterance strikes them as raucous. But even in the earliest works, such as the portrait of the younger Vincenzo Gonzaga in the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, a fragment cut from the altarpiece of the Gonzaga family, Rubens has already apprehended the mystery of living beings, and the dark-haired boy is delineated with all the essential conviction of life that we find in any of Rubens’s great later works.

In perhaps no other artist is there, as in Rubens, so great a consistency from first to last — or rather let us say, few others expressed so early in their careers a single urge which was to distinguish and dominate their entire oeuvre. An early Madonna by Titian, still redolent of the poetry and lyricism of Giorgione and Giovanni Bellini, gives little hint of the direction his noble, civilized talent was ultimately to take; a Rembrandt of the thirties, sparkling and rich, might have led us to predict greatness for its author, but it would have been difficult to prophesy from it that this greatness in maturity would produce the wonderful and awful self-portraits of the sixties. With Rubens, however, running the danger of over-simplification, one might say that life itself and all the manifestations of life came first, and his development, through a long and admittedly complex series of changes and phases, was actually a process of increase, of deepening and enrichment, with never a loss in this primary, essential quality of vitality.

Our new picture is thought to date from about 1612, three or four years after Rubens's return from an eight-year sojourn in Italy, chiefly in Mantua, where he had worked for the Duke Vincenzo Gonzaga. At the time when it was painted he would then have been about thirty-five and married for three years to the beautiful, clear-eyed Isabella Brant. Indeed one romanticizing critic has tried to read in the face of Atalanta the features of Isabella, but the memory of her portraits in The Hague and elsewhere adequately discounts this notion. Comparison of our Atalanta and Meleager with a much later mythological painting such as the Museum’s glorious Venus and Adonis of about 1635 reveals more sharply than simple analysis the characteristics of the early style. In the new picture every figure is caught in a barely arrested motion. Atalanta has just received in her lap the heavy head of the wild boar, the angry tusks seeming scarcely to have ceased their slashing movement since the infliction of the death wound. She turns in surprised gratitude to Meleager, who with his right hand is just letting go of
Atalanta and Meleager, by Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640). Recently acquired by the Museum
the bristling pelt. His other hand catches at the dog that leaps against him. The horn is being blown, the wild Fury in the background tears at her snaky locks. In the Venus and Adonis, on the other hand, the tension of the action is all slackened. Venus, without rising, tries to hold back Adonis with a lingering, caressing appeal, and the motions are all measured and restrained. In the early painting they are almost explosive. In composition the pattern of the interlacing lines in the youthful work is angular and jarring, in contrast to the undulating, legato design of the Venus and Adonis. In the manner of rendering the textures and tones of flesh, the two works are equally far apart. In the earlier painting the skin is firm, almost swollen, and gleams with the excitement of the palpitating flesh it binds; in the later it is mellow and sweetly soft, absorbing rather than reflecting the light upon it. And there is the widest difference in the colors. While red is the dominant note in the draperies of both pictures, the reds of the Venus and Adonis show in their depths a tawny richness that is almost russet; the mantle of Atalanta, however, is a magenta glaze, its purplish gleam accented by the underdress of purest white and repeated in the coldly translucent blue-white skin of her bare breast. Here the shadows too are cold and metallic, whereas in the other picture there is a brownish, autumnal warmth.

When painting our Atalanta and Meleager Rubens surely had recourse to the tale as it was told by Ovid in the Metamorphoses (Book viii, lines 260 ff.), which the biographer van Mander refers to as the bible of the Flemish painters. In fact there is an illustrated Ovid of 1563 in the Museum Library which has a woodcut with Meleager shown, as in our painting, in the very moment of his chivalrous and disastrous act of rewarding Atalanta for her Amazonian prowess. The story of Meleager and Atalanta, the royal daughter of Arcadia, is one of the most racy and delicious in all of Ovid. The account begins with the birth of Meleager to the king and queen of Calydon and the prediction made by the Fates to his mother Althaea that his life should last only as long as a certain brand then burning in the fire. Althaea snatched the brand from the flames, extinguished it, and for many years treasured it with watchful devotion. There follows then the history of the savage boar, sent by vengeful Diana to ravage Calydon, and of the hunt that Meleager, already famous for his exploits with the Argonauts, organized to seek out and kill the terrible creature. The princess Atalanta takes part in the hunt, and it is she who inflicts the first wound on the wild monster. Meleager, following up, kills the boar with his spear, but in what seems like perfectly justifiable, if enamored, homage to her skill (or luck), presents the head of the creature to her. Meleager’s uncles, the brothers of Althaea, are less chivalrous sportsmen, and see otherwise. A wild and bloody battle contesting the right of Atalanta to the trophy ensues, and Meleager kills his grumbling relatives. His mother, coming upon the bodies of her slain brothers, is torn between her maternal and fraternal affections, and finally, in rage against Meleager for what he has done, throws the fateful brand upon the fire, and Meleager, in the blossoming of his youth and love, perishes.

This new painting does not celebrate the only occasion when Rubens was beguiled by the myth of Atalanta and Meleager. In his later career he illustrated it at least twice again, and paintings in Munich, Dresden, and Vienna attest to the attraction the theme held for him. Two paintings with this subject are listed in the inventory of works left in his studio at his death. The Museum at Cassel in Germany possesses a replica of our picture, which, though infinitely weaker in conception and execution, was two generations ago considered the original by Rubens. As early as 1913, however, editions of the official Cassel catalogue had begun to refer to our version as the “better example” of the two, and the 1938 edition calls ours the original, admitting the Cassel version to be a mere repetition by a pupil in the workshop of Rubens.

The Museum’s picture is painted on a panel composed of five strips of wood joined horizontally, and along the joinings it has suf-
Detail of the new Rubens
Detail of the new Rubens
fered some losses. The absence of the original glazes in these parts accounts for slight, but somewhat disturbing, passages of shadow, especially on the face and throat of Atalanta. But these shadows, though less meaningful than we are accustomed to find with Rubens, are very slight flaws indeed in a painting with so many convincing claims to his authorship.

When the Atalanta and Meleager was placed on exhibition in the newly arranged Flemish Gallery this spring, it was not really its debut in the Metropolitan Museum. As long ago as the winter of 1886 it had been exhibited here, a loan from the dealer Charles Sedelmeyer of Paris. It had belonged to the Dukes of Marlborough, who owned so many other great paintings by Rubens, several of them gifts to the first duke from the city of Brussels. By 1820 it was described in a guide book as hanging in the Green Drawing Room at Blenheim. Afterward it passed to the Right Honorable George Cavendish Bentinck, at whose death in 1886 Sedelmeyer acquired it. It was later owned for some years by the Parisian collector Rodolphe Kann, and early in this century came to New York to the private gallery of the late Henry Goldman. It was lent to the World’s Fair in Flushing in 1939.

The Museum’s other early Rubens, the huge, decorative Wolf and Fox Hunt, like the recent acquisition, is also brimful of limitless life. It will be noted with entertainment that the sweating Fleming, blowing a great rustic blast upon his hunting horn, appears in both pictures. And Rubens had good reason for introducing this lusty blond animal into each of them, for in the delineation of the purely sensual being, he epitomizes the abounding energy and gusto that surge through all his works.

Detail of Rubens's Wolf and Fox Hunt