ATTRIBUTED TO
JACOB DE BACKER

(Antwerp 1560 - Antwerp 1590)

The Finding of Moses

oil on panel
95.5 x 162 cm (37½ x 63¾ in)

THIS INTERPRETATION OF *THE FINDING OF Moses* forms an elegant and harmonious composition. The scene depicts the discovery of the baby Moses, his mother having hidden him in the reeds by a riverbank to avoid the persecution of the Hebrews by the Pharaoh. The biblical story, told in Exodus 2: 3-9, narrates how when Bithiah, the daughter of the Pharaoh, came to bathe in the river, she spied the basket in the reeds and sent her servant to fetch it. Miriam, the sister of Moses, approached the Pharaoh's daughter and offered to find a Hebrew woman to nurse the baby for her, subsequently returning with her mother. When the child grew up, his mother returned Moses to the Pharaoh's daughter, and he became her son. She named him Moses, 'Because,' she said, 'I drew him out of the water'.

Central to the composition is the seated figure of the Pharaoh's daughter. Gracefully dressed and wearing a crown, a servant girl stands behind her, fanning her with a canopy of feathers. Bithiah speaks with a woman dressed in a flowing white and yellow dress, whose exposed left breast and covered head reveal her to be Moses' mother offering to nurse the child. Between the two conversing figures a younger woman, presumably Miriam, listens intently. The baby Moses is laid down by two servant women, whilst another points to the location of his hiding. Alongside the river, the scene of his discovery is additionally depicted as two ladies pull the baby from the reed bed. In the background on the left, a mythical city lies shrouded in mist, whilst on the right one can see the formal garden of a classically designed villa.

Attributed to Jacob de Backer, *The Finding of Moses* is closely comparable in style and execution to de Backer's *The Three Stages of Man, Allegory* in the Hermitage (fig.1). In both paintings, the drapery is crisp and buoyant, the strong, muscular figures reminiscent of Michelangelo (1475-1564), and the central grouping of intertwined and interactive figures dominate the composition. Furthermore, there are noticeable facial similarities in the female figures in both works.

Jacob de Backer lived only to the age of thirty, and despite a short period of productivity, there are a relatively high number of works ascribed to him. According to the Flemish biographer Karel van Mander (1548-1606), de Backer was abandoned by his father as a young boy. He then worked in the studio of Antonio van Palermo (1503/13-before 1589) and later entered the workshop of Hendrick van Steenwijck the Elder (1550-1603). Van Mander claimed that de Backer's early death was caused by the strenuous labour imposed on the young artist in van Palermo's studio.

Little is known about the artist's training, though it seems that he never became a master in the Guild of St. Luke. His work is evidently influenced by the Mannerism of Rome and Florence, in particular by Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) and his generation, but there is no real evidence that de Backer ever visited Italy. Many of his compositions have complex allegorical subjects, which may indicate that he had a humanistic education and that his clientele was drawn from the Antwerp intelligentsia.

Right: Attributed to Jacob de Backer, *The Finding of Moses* (Detail)
Overleaf: *The Finding of Moses* (Full image)

Jacob de Backer, *The Three Stages of Man, Allegory,*
late sixteenth century, The Hermitage, St. Petersburg (Figure 1)