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P  
NICOLAS  
POUSSIN

JAMES THOMPSON

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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**T**he paintings by Nicolas Poussin in the Metropolitan Museum form a remarkable group. Not only is each one exceptionally beautiful, but they span the artist's career with representative examples of his constantly evolving style. Like all truly great artists, Poussin never painted the same way twice. His ideas about art and even the touch of his brush continually changed as he grew from fiery young Romantic to awe-inspiring master.

With the exception of *The Companions of Rinaldo*, a magnificent gift from Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, the paintings were purchased by the Museum. The earliest in date, *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*, was also the earliest acquisition. It was one of 174 paintings in three collections that the Museum bought in March 1871, less than a year after its founding. More than half a century passed before another genuine Poussin entered the collection. Then, in 1924, the Museum purchased not one but two superb canvases from the New York dealer Durlacher Brothers: the Raphaellesque *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*, which had belonged to the princes of Liechtenstein from about 1760, and the sublime *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*, a work justly celebrated by British writers and artists during the nineteenth century. Immediately after the Second World War, the greater part of the collection formed by Sir Francis Cook came onto the market, and the Museum took the opportunity to buy *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. It would be hard to imagine ever again forming such a choice selection of the artist's work.

In the following essay James Thompson, associate professor of art history at Western Carolina University, discusses the Metropolitan's paintings and drawings by Poussin and places them in the wider context of Europe during the seventeenth century. Thompson, a former assistant in the Department of European Paintings, last wrote for the *Bulletin* in 1989, when he contributed a fine study of Jean-Baptiste Greuze that coincided with a special exhibition of all of the Greuze works in the Museum. The five Poussin canvases featured in this publication are on permanent display in Gallery 10.

EVERETT FAHY

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COVER: Detail of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* (fig. 20)

*Oh, what a great storyteller!*

GIAN LORENZO BERNINI

**N**icolas Poussin (1594–1665) has been consistently admired by artists and scholars, but less loved by the general public. Such a reaction probably would not have surprised or even displeased the painter, who worked extremely hard at his art and expected a reciprocal effort from his viewers. The Irish writer James Joyce counseled readers to spend the same seventeen years trying to comprehend *Finnegans Wake* that he took to write it; Poussin’s sustained labor on each canvas similarly merits (and requires) more than a passing glance. The compass, application, variety, and coherence of this fiercely diligent composer and storyteller demand detailed scrutiny and careful appreciation.

Few writers have denied that Poussin’s pictures create a nexus for the work of his predecessors, his contemporaries, and almost all subsequent French artists. The rich heritage of French painting, indeed the whole Western pictorial tradition, makes little sense without his central contribution. But, for the uninitiated, many of Poussin’s paintings still appear cold, rigorous, cerebral, and arcane. Thumping his forehead, the flamboyant Italian sculptor Bernini declared, “Signor Poussin is a painter who works from here.” Viewers may concede what the English writer William Hazlitt called Poussin’s “laborious and mighty grasp” and acknowledge the artist’s crucial influence on and importance for European painting without particularly admiring or enjoying his work.

Yet even those who prize in painting the unexpected pleasure or the daring intuition can find special rewards in this supremely conscientious artist. Metropolitan Museum visitors who pause to tarry longer and examine closely Poussin’s five powerful paintings—three of them unquestioned masterworks—will recognize that these pictures are far less chilly than they initially seem and



offer much more than mere didactic sermons. Subtly reinforcing and animating even Poussin's grandest formal conceptions is a visual quality too seldom perceived, and too infrequently acknowledged: passion.

Emotion and restraint, feeling and form are generally regarded as contraries, but certain artists and performers manage to combine them in ways that do not oppose or negate, but rather focus and concentrate each other. Like an animal in a cage, passion is all the more poignant for being confined, and the clarity and necessity of the controlling system may equally be enhanced when paired with the intensity it restrains. In 1649, little more than a decade after his *Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences* (*Discourse on the Method for Rightly Conducting Reasoning and Searching for the Truth in Science*), Poussin's philosophical contemporary René Descartes published his *Traité des passions de l'âme* (*Treatise on the Passions of the Soul*). The other important French philosopher of the period, Blaise Pascal, united the two extremes in one of his *pensées* or "thoughts" (no. 530): "All our reasoning comes down to surrendering to feeling."

Within Poussin's rigorously calculated—overly calculated, his detractors claim—pictures appear a host of unforeseen touches, sensuous and animating *divertissements*. Hazlitt paired Poussin's "native gravity" with a "native levity." Poussin may be justly famed as an "architect" of pictures, but he is at all times, and omnipresently, a *painter* of them. In spite of his love of complex structure, Poussin partly followed the advice of a contemporary English clergyman, Robert Herrick, who in a famous poem urged his readers to take "Delight in Disorder." Arguing against a regimented art that was "too precise in every part," Herrick counseled an alternative "sweet disorder." While Poussin certainly did not pursue irregularity as a goal, his work is consistently enlivened by surprising details: the angular shaft of light that catches an infant's foot, a piece of fruit, or a woman's breast. Framed by the rigid horizontal and vertical order of background architecture, such illuminated organic shapes create balance by means of indirect assemblage and accumulation rather than strict symmetry.

Poussin infused his work with passion because Poussin's work *was* his passion. "I have neglected nothing," perhaps his most famous single statement about his art, was less a boast than an affirmation of personal procedure. With his brush Poussin interpreted and animated the passionate poetry of his heart, filtered through the structural order of his head.

Poussin did not leave behind a portrait of anyone else but completed two memorable paintings of himself (figs. 1, 2). Both of these exceptional works were products of his artistic maturity, done in response to persistent requests from his patrons and friends Jean Pointel and Paul Fréart de Chantelou. Both reveal a combination of inner exploration and outer image building. The por-



1 Jean Pesne (1623–1700).  
*Engraving after Self-portrait  
of Nicolas Poussin, 1649. 14 x  
9½ in. (35.6 x 24.1 cm). The  
original oil painting is in the  
Staatliche Museen, Berlin.  
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund,  
1953 (53.600.1390)*

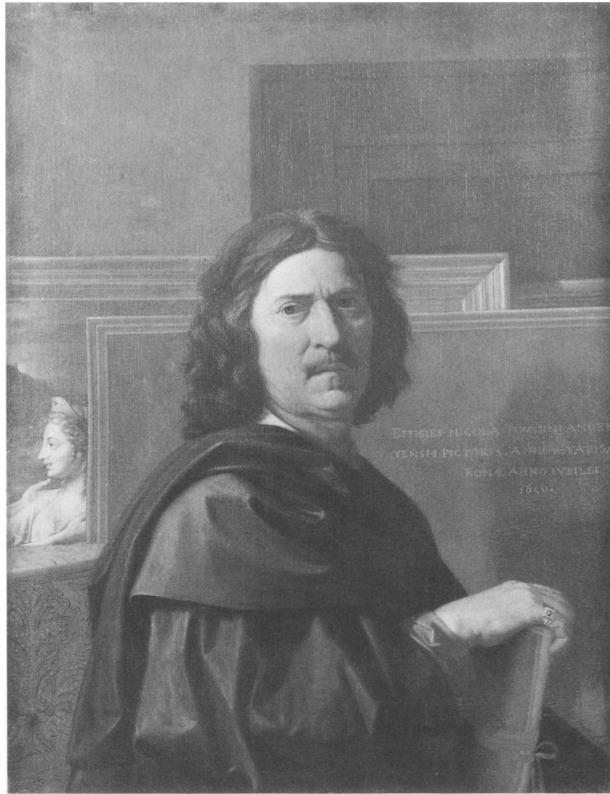
trait done for Pointel, here represented by an engraving after it by Jean Pesne that reverses the composition (fig. 1), is the less iconic of the two. Behind the painter, relief putti bear a rhythmically descending swag, and Poussin's dark gown follows an upward-spiraling sequence of folds. The artist's pose and his slightly cocked head establish a gentle curve in sinuous counterpoint to the vertical. The twinkle in his eye accompanies the start of a sad smile. His hands cross at the wrists, a pencil holder poised in his right hand and his left holding a volume entitled *DE LUMINE ET COLORE* (*On Light and Color*). The formal inscription above refers not only to the Normandy village in which he was born, *Andelyensis* (of Les Andelys), but also the year of his birth, if his recorded age, fifty-five, is subtracted from the date in the picture, 1649.

Shortly thereafter Poussin painted another portrait of himself, this time for the French civil servant and scholar Chantelou. A remark in his letter to the same man two years earlier suggests that Poussin repeated the unaccustomed task only because he doubted the ability of his overpriced contemporaries to perform it adequately:

I would already have had my portrait done to send to you before now, as I know you would like. But it annoys me to spend a dozen *pistoles* for a head in the manner of M. Mignard, the one I know who does them the best, as his are cold, bruised, rouged, and without facility or vigor.



2 Nicolas Poussin. *Self-portrait*, ca. 1650. Oil on canvas, 38½ x 29⅞ in. (97.8 x 74 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



An icon of uncompromising pictorial probity, the image Poussin ultimately created for Chantelou (fig. 2) has since stood as the definitive distillation of the artist. Poussin's pose firmly establishes the vertical: even his hair is parted down the middle. A staggered sequence of framed canvases behind him gives his compositional background the rectangular overlap and interplay seen in the best abstract works by Piet Mondrian or Hans Hofmann.

The important biographical and critical account of Poussin published by Giovanni Pietro Bellori in 1672 explains that the only visible subject behind the figure of the artist, a woman shown in profile with an extra eye in her tiara, represents an allegorical embodiment of Painting embraced by the disembodied hands of Friendship. Thus Poussin provided a touching tribute to his relationship with his patron. The closer one examines this imposing image of the aging artist, the more human its details become: the wrinkles on Poussin's neck, the graying hairs of his head, the weary sigh on his lightly parted lips. When Bernini saw the two self-portraits in Paris the year before Poussin died, he deemed Chantelou's picture a better likeness than the less formal, slightly earlier work done for Pointel. Unexpectedly, this official public image also captures the private man.

Poussin depicted himself as the embodiment of distinction. So profound was Bernini's belated recognition of the painter's genius that Europe's greatest sculptor (some said its greatest man) sadly confided to Chantelou after a pro-

tracted study of Poussin works in his collection: “Today you have caused me great distress by showing me the talent of a man who makes me realize that I know nothing.” Yet the career that ended in such impressive peer recognition had humble beginnings.

**B**y the time Poussin was born in Normandy, religious wars had ruined the economic prosperity of his well-bred parents. His first artistic instruction probably came from the itinerant Beauvais artist Quentin Varin, who was visiting Les Andelys to paint pictures for the local church. In 1612 Poussin went to Paris, where he worked under minor masters like Ferdinand Elle and Georges Lallement. There the young Poussin was able to study Italian works in the royal collection, as well as engravings after Raphael and Giulio Romano. An instant Italophile, Poussin made two abortive attempts to reach Rome. Once he went as far as Florence before insufficient funds forced his return to France.

Back in Paris, Poussin painted six temperas for the Jesuits, an undertaking that attracted the attention of the court poet Giambattista Marino. Known in France as the Cavalier Marin, Marino was a Neapolitan who had been brought to Paris by the French queen and former Florentine Marie de Médicis. Marino commissioned the young artist to do a sequence of drawings based on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, thus germinating Poussin’s enthusiasm for that transformational text, an association that blossomed throughout his career.

In 1623, the same year that Cardinal Maffeo Barberini was elected Pope Urban VIII, Poussin followed Marino back to Italy. The painter’s extended stopover in Venice introduced Poussin firsthand to the great sixteenth-century painters of that city. Venetian artists like Titian, Veronese, and Tintoretto had embarked upon an unprecedented exploration of the coloristic range and richness of oil paint, a development reasonably linked to the dense “wet” light and hazy atmosphere created by their native city’s lagoons and canals. The warm glow seen both in paintings of Venice and in the city itself has the crepuscular luminosity of the setting sun.

Poussin’s Venetian visit meant that he did not reach Rome until the following year, at which time Marino presented him to the pope’s nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini. Marino’s reported introduction of the recently arrived provincial Frenchman counters the conventional notion of Poussin as a lofty and severe scholar: “Look, a young man with the fury of a demon.”

The cardinal employed Poussin to paint his first masterpiece, *The Death of Germanicus* (Minneapolis Institute of Arts), an orchestrated stoic frieze that for centuries stood as the archetypal embodiment of noble, classical death. Still, the artist’s first years in Rome were financially insecure. During this early period Poussin turned out a variety of works, including decorative scenes like *Landscape with a River God* (fig. 3), currently on loan to the Metropolitan.





3 Nicolas Poussin. *Landscape with a River God*, ca. 1626. Oil on canvas, 30 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 34 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (76.8 x 88 cm). Private collection, on loan to The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Originally united with another panel, of *Venus and Adonis* (fig. 4), now in the Musée Fabre, Montpellier, this vista was commissioned as an overdoor for Cardinal Francesco Barberini's private secretary, Cassiano dal Pozzo. Throughout Poussin's career dal Pozzo was to be the painter's close friend and important patron.

Major scholars, among them the late Anthony Blunt, have doubted that *Landscape with a River God* and its companion piece are authentic works by Poussin. Some of the uncertainty may derive from the pair's function as architectural decoration, which gives both components a superficially generic look. Careful study, however, reveals felicities of observation and execution that strongly suggest the hand of the young Poussin.

The river god is rendered with a sophisticated comprehension of foreshortening, musculature, and sagging skin. The languid grace of this heroic personification recalls the reclining figure of Dusk on Michelangelo's tomb for

Lorenzo de' Medici, duke of Urbino, a work Poussin would have seen in Florence. In other protagonists the painter's sense of accurate dynamics is also apparent. The greyhound cocks its slender head in a crocodile profile to slake its thirst from spilling water caught at the source. The putto strains backward, his hidden right hand tugging at the courser's red collar in an ineffectual effort at restraint. Both figures demonstrate a keen eye and incisive touch not normally present in the works of Pietro Testa and his followers (the group in which Blunt suggested the painter of this small landscape could be found).

Most important of all, though, is the quality of light in the picture, the evocation of a warm summer's evening, which, when the painting is joined to its companion piece, produces what the art historian Konrad Oberhuber has called the "purest idyll" of Poussin's early career. The late afternoon gloaming gilds and burnishes the profuse foliage. If the two pictures are reassembled in their original configuration (figs. 3, 4), rich Venetian light illuminates the broad horizontal sweep of a pastoral symphony, a landscape saturating the senses of sight, taste, and touch. The playfully erotic wrestling of the nymphs in the middle ground of the Metropolitan's picture diminutively echoes the more seductive and serious embrace of Montpellier's Venus, into which the young hunter Adonis hesitantly descends. Combined with the ivy intertwining the oak above the lovers, their coupling creates a vertical counterpoint that ascends the entire height of the composition.

Yet such subtle talents did not bring Poussin much work. Only after the withdrawal of Pietro da Cortona and through the special intercession of dal Pozzo was Poussin selected to receive his major commission for an altarpiece in Saint Peter's, the grisly *Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus*. Although Poussin pro-

4 Nicolas Poussin. *Venus and Adonis*, ca. 1626. Oil on canvas, 29½ x 44½ in. (74.9 x 113 cm). Musée Fabre, Montpellier





duced a remarkable painting, his resulting effort was not a popular success. Ignoring its narrative strength and skillful handling, contemporary and later writers have cited the picture as evidence of the artist's technical and temperamental unsuitability for large enterprises.

That relative "failure" and Poussin's subsequent severe illness were major determining events in his career. In an undated note to dal Pozzo, probably penned around this time, Poussin stated:

Not being able to greet you in person on account of an unexpected illness, I am presuming to write yet again, to beseech you with all my might to help me in some way; I require such aid because most of the time I am ill, just when I have no income on which to live, other than the work of my hands.

Shortly thereafter the artist married Anne-Marie Dughet, daughter of a French pastrycook who had taken Poussin in when he was sick. Following his recovery, Poussin concentrated on smaller-scale pictures for private patrons, instead of competing for the religious and royal commissions that kept contemporaries like Rubens and Cortona so monumentally busy and prosperous.

A remarkable early painting whose concentrated emotional focus derived from the scale and drama of Poussin's altarpiece in Saint Peter's is *The Massacre of the Innocents* at Chantilly (fig. 5). The group of the executioner and the mother who frantically tries to stay his hand was probably inspired by the famous classical sculpture of the *Gaul Killing Himself and His Wife* (fig. 6), here illustrated in a contemporary engraving that sets the group on a pedestal in the piazza della Rotonda in front of the Pantheon. The *Gaul Killing Himself* was discovered sometime before 1623 and displayed as one of the famed marbles of the Ludovisi family, along with the group of *Castor and Pollux* (see fig. 7). These statues and others similar to them were carefully measured by artists like Poussin in order to discover the ideal proportions with which to represent the human form. Poussin's *Massacre* may also have been influenced by a dramatic precursor for whom he avowed only strong distaste. Caravaggio, a man in Poussin's words "born to destroy painting," had already in his *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew* (fig. 8) combined a central assassin and dying saint who presage the conflicting executioner and mother of Poussin's *Massacre*.

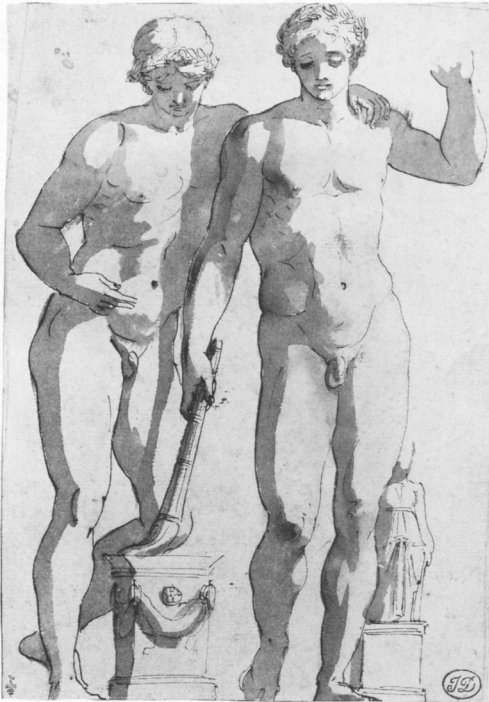
In moving from his dynamic drawings to the frozen poetry of the *Massacre*, Poussin may also have sought classical inspiration for the anguished profile of the grieving mother on the right. His drawing of a bacchante from the Borghese krater holding a dead hind (fig. 9) is close enough to the mother with her slaughtered infant in the right middle ground of the *Massacre* to suggest that Poussin in this instance anticipated the advice Sir Joshua Reynolds dispensed over a century later in the twelfth of his fifteen *Discourses on Art* (1760–90) given to students of the English Royal Academy. There Reynolds suggested that "a Bacchante leaning backward," who would normally express



5 Nicolas Poussin. *The Massacre of the Innocents*, ca. 1628. Oil on canvas, 57<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 67<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (147 x 171.1 cm). Musée Condé, Chantilly



6 François Perrier (1590–1650). *Gaul Killing Himself and His Wife*, 1638. Etching of a Roman marble group, copied from a Greek sculpture of the 3rd century B.C., in the Terme Museum, Rome. Published in Perrier's *Segmenta nobilium signorum et statuarii quae aeternae ruinis erepta...*, Rome, 1638. Thomas J. Watson Library



7 Nicolas Poussin. *Castor and Pollux*, ca. 1628. Pen and brown wash on paper, 9 5/8 x 6 3/4 in. (24.6 x 17.1 cm). Drawing after the so-called Ildefonso Group, now in the Prado, Madrid. Musée Condé, Chantilly

8 Caravaggio (Michelangelo Merisi, 1573–1610). *Martyrdom of Saint Matthew*, 1599–1600. Oil on canvas, 127 x 135 in. (323 x 343 cm). Contarelli Chapel, San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome





9 Nicolas Poussin.  
*Bacchante from the  
Borghese Krater*,  
ca. 1627. Pen and  
brown wash on  
paper, 9½ x 6¼ in.  
(24.1 x 15.9 cm).  
British Museum,  
London



“an enthusiastic frantic kind of joy,” could paradoxically also be utilized to embody the opposite: “the frantic agony of grief.”

The youthful reworking of motifs from classical sculpture, a practice that Poussin followed his whole life, was counterbalanced in his early pictures by an admiring painterly application of Venetian color. His *Inspiration of the Poet* (fig. 10) luminously reconciles the two. Long after it has first been seen, the golden Parnassian atmosphere of this picture persistently glows in the memory, even as its structure is informed by Poussin’s studies after antique marbles such as his splendid copy of *Castor and Pollux* (fig. 7).

Also known as the “Ildefonso Group,” this sculpture was on view sometime before 1623 in the garden of the Villa Ludovisi and was later owned by Cardinal Camillo Massimi, who also possessed the Metropolitan’s Poussin of *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus* (fig. 13). Poussin’s sketch after the *Castor and Pollux* makes minor adjustments of pose, but its major alteration is to transform the sculpture’s lithe adolescents into muscled heroes, like the magis-

10 Nicolas Poussin. *The Inspiration of the Poet*, ca. 1630. Oil on canvas, 72½ x 84¼ in. (184.2 x 214 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



terial Apollo in *The Inspiration of the Poet*. Poussin's distinctive blocks of shadow in the drawing not only create sculptural bulk, but also evocatively suggest the play of sunlight on marble.

Originally stimulated by his Venetian visit, Poussin's interest in color was further enriched when he was able to study the three bacchanals that Titian had painted more than a century earlier for Alfonso d'Este in Ferrara. The German artist Joachim von Sandrart described going in the illustrious company of, among others, Claude Lorrain, Poussin, and Pietro da Cortona to view the Titians, then in Rome as part of the Ludovisi collection. Poussin copied these works, and his early *Youth of Bacchus* (fig. 11) borrowed its sensuous drunken nude in the lower right almost directly from Titian's *Bacchanal of the Andrians* (fig. 12). Although later canonized as the apostle of austere linear order, the youthful Poussin was intoxicated by Italian sunshine and the rainbow hues used by his Venetian predecessors. The legendary English art critic John Ruskin judged Poussin's bacchanalian revels as his finest works, "always brightly wanton and wild, full of frisk and fire."

11 Nicolas Poussin. *The Youth of Bacchus*, ca. 1626. Oil on canvas, 38<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 53<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (97.2 x 135.9 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



12 Titian (Tiziano Vecellio), ca. 1488/89–1576). *The Bacchanal of the Andrians*, 1523–25. Oil on canvas, 68<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 76 in. (174.9 x 193 cm). Prado, Madrid







OPPOSITE

13 Nicolas Poussin. *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*, ca. 1626. Oil on canvas, 38<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 28<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (97.5 x 72.7 cm). Purchase, 1871 (71.56)

In 1871 Poussin's *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus* (fig. 13) became the first painting by the artist to enter an American museum. Its subject is taken from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, book XI. The Phrygian king Midas's fond dream of a golden touch having proved a nightmare, the repentant monarch was advised by the god Bacchus that total immersion in the headwaters of the river Pactolus would wash away both the outer guilt of his body and the inner guilt of his former avarice. The Metropolitan's version, one of two almost identical variants by Poussin, features a pair of putti rather than the solitary infant of the other picture (now in a New York private collection). The Metropolitan's work has a pendant, the celebrated *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig. 14), which also belonged to Poussin's lifelong friend Cardinal Massimi.

The rich earth tones of *Midas Washing* had their origins in Poussin's early enthusiasm for Venetian art, at its peak in the late 1620s. The picture's atmosphere is twilit, almost autumnal. The composition is rather obviously constructed upon the opposed diagonals of the personified Pactolus (amplified by the body of Midas and iterated in the putti) and the countering of the substantial tree trunk, ascending from the river god's loins and his drawn-up left leg. Combined with the picture's somewhat somber mien, the arrangement initially makes the painting seem less like a dramatic narrative than a decorative landscape panel. Yet a closer examination uncovers powerful details amid the broad handling.

For even as a young artist Poussin worked the alchemy of all great pictorial storytellers, transforming colored pigment into the myriad substances of imagined narrative. Here it becomes the bulk of an overhanging boulder, the dimpled straining flesh of the two putti (the left leg of one softly reflected in the rushing water below), or the leafy lower tree growth that recurs in the woven wreaths sported by three of the painting's four protagonists. The reclining river god may be a stock Baroque motif, but there are no flaws in his graceful construction. Feet, the bane of unsure figure draftsmen, are (as always in Poussin's works) dispatched without apparent difficulty.

The story's royal principal is easily missed, crouching just beyond the river god, whose knee makes strong visual contact with Midas's head and rhythmic interaction with his body. Midas is confined to a compositional triangle condensed even more tightly by his robe, which descends from the tree's lower branch and is highlighted by the setting sun. The thin sliver of water, pouring from the barely glimpsed, spilling vase held by Pactolus, discreetly forms the edging of a lower cloak for the naked Midas. The king's intense frown reflects the pain of his purification in the icy water, while his fetal crouch suggests a rebirth. Thus his eccentric, secondary position can be seen as contributing to and expressing the narrative.





Detail of *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus*



14 Nicolas Poussin. *Et in Arcadia Ego*, ca. 1627. Oil on canvas, 39 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 32 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. (101 x 81.9 cm). Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. Reproduced by permission of the Chatsworth Settlement Trustees



The picture's pendant at Chatsworth, *Et in Arcadia Ego* (fig. 14), is one of two dramatically different treatments of the subject (the later version is in the Louvre). According to a subtle, extended analysis by Erwin Panofsky, the Latin title read from the tomb by the shepherds is best understood as “Even in Arcadia there am I,” the “I” being death, whose existence in this pastoral paradise is surprising. Poussin’s conception shadows the most benign of environments with the sadness of passing time and mortality.

The composition of *Et in Arcadia Ego* is echoed fairly closely in the Metropolitan’s painting *The Companions of Rinaldo* (fig. 15). Both feature figures whose progress diagonally to the right is halted against a raised landscape and counterpoised trees. The looming rocky outcrop in *Rinaldo* also repeats the background ballast of the *Midas* picture.

*Rinaldo* takes its subject from Tasso's verse epic *Gerusalemme liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*), which enlivens its treatment of the First Crusade with exotic adventures and star-crossed love affairs. In the relevant section of Tasso's poem, the sorceress Armida has fallen in love with the Christian champion Rinaldo—a first encounter documented in one of Poussin's most magical paintings (now in the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London)—and has abducted him to her palace on one of the Fortunate Isles. There her magic spells have seduced him into obediently returning her affection. In search of their friend, the knights Carlo and Ubaldo have made a long sea journey to the island in a boat steered by a mysterious, dove-eyed woman of angelic mien, garbed in an iridescent robe. Onshore, they find the way blocked by a dragon. Carlo draws his sword but is counseled by Ubaldo to employ the magic wand given him by Peter the Hermit before they set out. Their confrontation with the guardian beast is the subject of the Metropolitan's painting.

After the sylvan obscurities of *Midas*, *The Companions of Rinaldo* fairly glitters with crisp excitement, partly an effect of its pristine condition. Watched by their calmly approving pilot, the intrepid soldiers sport armor shiny enough for a parade, yet they are armed for combat and alert to immediate danger. (Their Roman costume is an anachronism, since Tasso's tale takes place in the eleventh century.) A decorative dragon or sphinx adorns the helmet of the wand-wielding Carlo, echoing the more formidable snarling beast on the ground. The inner oval of Ubaldo's shield repeats the rhythmic twists and turns of their convoluted antagonist, depicted by Poussin at the moment when poisonous rage turns to fearful retreat. The shield bears narrative as well as compositional weight, since only the reflection of their friend Rinaldo's passive, bewitched visage in its polished surface will awake him from Armida's enchantment.

Dating from the early 1630s, this picture numbered among the more than fifty Poussins originally owned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, already mentioned as one of the painter's most important patrons. A passionate antiquarian, dal Pozzo formed an extensive *museo cartaceo* or *museum chartaceum* (paper museum) comprising more than a thousand drawings that documented the surviving artistic splendors of ancient Rome. Poussin's contemporary Pietro Testa was a main contributor to this project, and the extent of Poussin's

OPPOSITE

15 Nicolas Poussin. *The Companions of Rinaldo*, ca. 1632. Oil on canvas, 46½ x 40¼ in. (118.1 x 102.2 cm). Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Wrightsman, 1977 (1977.1.2)



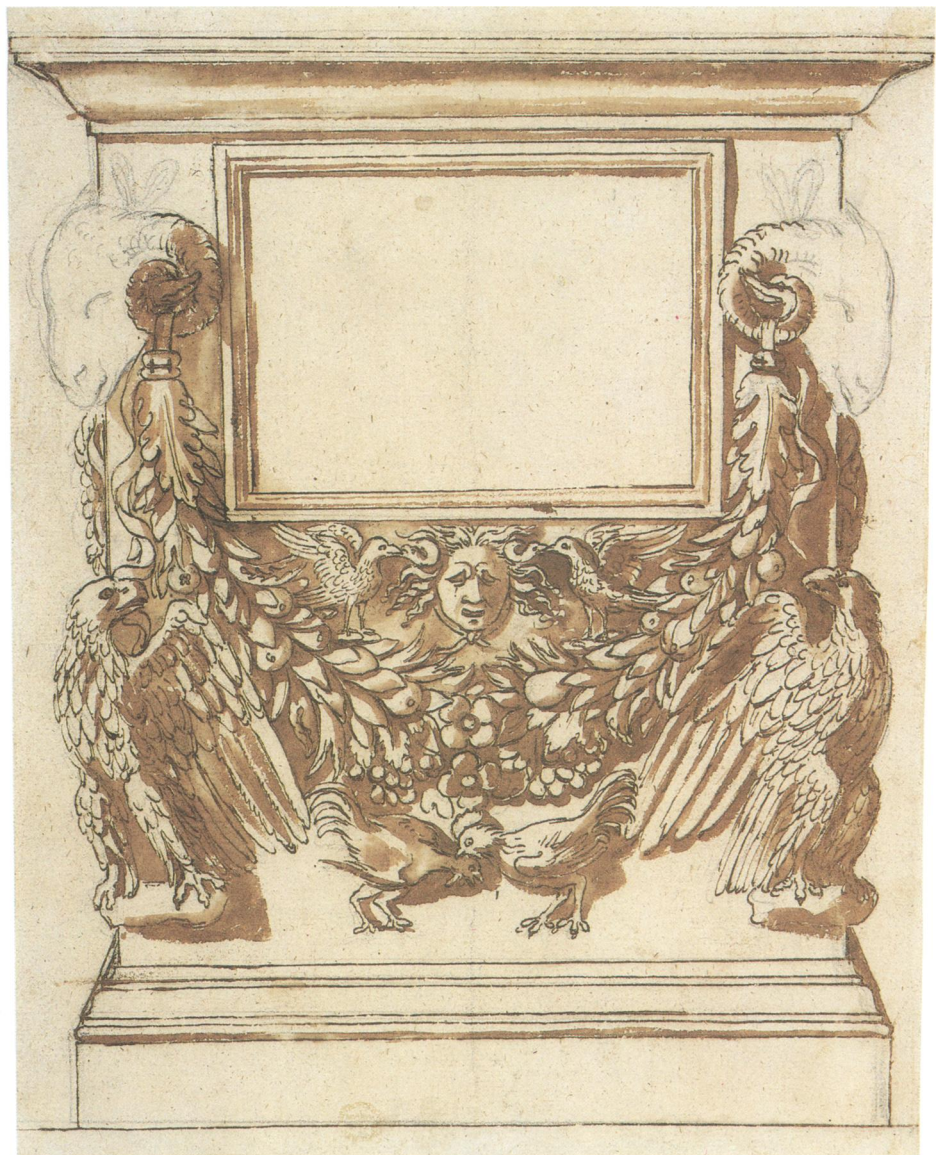




participation is still debated, since the artist described himself not as a producer but as a *scolare* (student) of the museum. An inventory of Poussin's atelier done over a decade after his death included "A book of drawings made by monsieur Poussin from the Antique, after Raphael, Giulio Romano, and others, for his own use" (*fatti... per suo studio*).

The Metropolitan's drawing of a cinerary urn (fig. 16) is the sort of work that might have been included in Poussin's book of classical and Renaissance studies. Cineraria served the Romans both as votive altars and as funerary receptacles for the ashes of the dead. Poussin's drawing was begun in black chalk, still clearly visible in the unfinished rams' heads. A quite similar relief in the Vatican (fig. 17) has horned satyrs on the sides; perhaps the painter was improvising around his as-yet-unidentified classical prototype.

16 Nicolas Poussin. *Cinerary Urn, after the Antique*, mid-1630s. Pen and brown ink, brown wash, over black chalk, on paper, 11<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 8<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (28.6 x 22.6 cm). Gift of Cornelius Vanderbilt, 1880 (80.3.583)





17 Cinerarium of Licinius Crassus Frugi, 1st century A.D. Roman marble relief, 72<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 31<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (183.8 x 80 cm). Vatican Museums, Rome

Poussin employed a sequence of ruled and careful freehand lines to define the horizontal and vertical edges of the cinerarium.

The eagles are essentially symmetrical but with noticeable variations, such as their different shadowing. As in his sketch of *Castor and Pollux* (fig. 7), Poussin employed light and shade to define not just form, but also a particular effect of light. Linear inventiveness and variety can be seen in the serrated wing feathers of the left eagle. What distinguished the drawings in Pozzo's paper museum from those in other similar collections was their combination of beauty and accuracy. Lacking the specific model for Poussin's cinerarium study, we cannot evaluate the latter quality but can certainly attest to the former.

While Poussin did six paintings and several drawings based on Tasso's *Gerusalemme liberata*, his only illustration to the other principal Italian epic poem of the Renaissance, Ariosto's *Orlando furioso*, is a single drawing now in the Metropolitan, *The Sorcerer Atlante Abducting Pinabello's Lady* (fig. 18). The composition of this lively sketch repeats rearing cavaliers in profile, with their potential for combat minimized by the aerial advantage of the winged steed.

Atlante's flying hippogriff, the offspring of a mare and a griffin, is all extended energy, its forelegs separating into claws silhouetted against the sky. Pinabello's earthbound mount is more geometric in shape: a close look at its hind legs reveals the artistic "splints" within which they were constructed. In the rather confusing linear interaction between Atlante and his captive, her left leg overlaps his right at mid-calf, while her right parallels the contour of the hippogriff's haunches. Pinabello shields himself protectively, inadvertently offering a fragile launching pad for the airborne steed. The beast's right wing is foreshortened, while the left rises outward to create a diagonal that counters the body's main upward motion. Added last, the landscape setting includes an eccentric tree, which decoratively fills the distance between the mounts, while the ground is defined in swift sequences of hatching.



18 Nicolas Poussin. *The Sorcerer Atlante Abducting Pinabello's Lady*, early 1630s. Pen and brown ink on paper,  $7\frac{5}{8} \times 4\frac{7}{16}$  in. (19.4 x 11.3 cm). Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971 (1972.118.224)



19 Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806). *Rinaldo, Astride Baiardo, Flies Off in Pursuit of Angelica*, ca. 1795. Black chalk with brown wash and touches of pen and brown ink on paper,  $15\frac{7}{16} \times 10\frac{5}{16}$  in. (39.2 x 26.2 cm). National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Rosenwald Collection

France's finest illustrations for *Orlando furioso* did not appear until more than a century after Poussin's sketch. The glorious drawings by Jean-Honoré Fragonard provide an interesting alternative to the solitary work by his distinguished predecessor. In Fragonard's sequence of Ariosto illustrations, subjects such as *Rinaldo, Astride Baiardo, Flies Off in Pursuit of Angelica* (fig. 19) show a similar interest in dynamic equestrian activity. But Fragonard shunned Poussin's linear contours for atmospheric luminosity and replaced his sculptural-relief profiling with recessive illusionism. A kind of Christian Achilles, Rinaldo was one of Charlemagne's greatest knights and appears in the extensive cast of characters employed by both Tasso and Ariosto. At the point in Ariosto's narrative illustrated by Fragonard's drawing, Rinaldo is described as "boiling over with anger," a state deftly embodied in the artist's effulgent composition. A winged allegorical figure glides in the hero's wake, while his horse, Baiardo, soars above a foaming waterfall that washes over a river god and two shy nymphs.

**T**he *Rape of the Sabine Women* (fig. 20) is a major work of Poussin's early maturity, datable to 1634. Probably more than any other of his paintings, it defines his kinship with and distance from his great predecessors and contemporaries. A second version of the picture in the Louvre is generally dated later. More complexly orchestrated, it lacks the authority and muscular impact of the first painting.

The Metropolitan's *Rape of the Sabine Women* was one of two works painted by Poussin for the maréchal de Créquy when he was the French ambassador to Rome in 1633–34 (the other, *Women Bathing*, is now lost). The largest of the Poussins in the Museum, the picture illustrates the ruse whereby the founders of Rome gained the wives required to populate the eternal city. Romulus and his men invited the neighboring Sabine warriors to compete in a series of sporting events and to bring their families to watch. At a pre-arranged signal from their leader, the Romans abandoned athletic pretenses and seized all available women, excluding mothers and the elderly.

In Poussin's picture Romulus stands majestically on the platform at the left, and has just raised the hem of his robe, thus unleashing the tumult below. Painted with crystalline exactitude, the composition suggests the moment's confusion through its dramatically intersecting angles and some disturbing portraits of the imbroglio's innocent victims, such as the old nurse, the children, the young mother, and the aged man whose forms combine in a major compositional triangle with the splendid Roman warrior in the right foreground. Clothed in a formfitting golden leather lorica, which emphasizes his heroic musculature, this figure provides a major diagonal axis for the picture, countering two pairs of abductors and victims on the left. Scholars have









20 Nicolas Poussin. *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, 1634. Oil on canvas, 60<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 82<sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (154.6 x 209.9 cm). Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1946 (46.160)



doubted the accuracy of the lorica's color and shape, but the compositional importance of this "Midas touch" may have affected both.

*The Rape of the Sabine Women* marks a new peak in Poussin's study and use of sculpture. Not only was he influenced by major three-dimensional creations of his predecessors and contemporaries, but he also had begun a personal practice of making small clay and wax figure models, which he placed on a miniature theatrical stage. There Poussin worked out the complicated rhythms and relationships of his painted compositions.

In addition to the *Gaul Killing Himself and His Wife* (fig. 6), the two pairs to the left of Poussin's *Sabine Women* have precedents in other notable Italian monuments. One important influence was the most magnificent of all Mannerist sculptures, Giambologna's *Rape of a Sabine Woman*, here illustrated in a contemporary chiaroscuro woodcut by Andrea Andreani (fig. 21). Giambologna composed his masterpiece as a purely formal solution to the problem of integrating a three-figure group in a way that demanded an uninterrupted, encircling scrutiny from the viewer. Only later did contemporaries urge him to add the accompanying narrative reliefs on its base that specified his subject matter.

Like Giambologna, Poussin gave formal concerns great weight in his work; storytelling for him was inseparable from visual harmony. Having seen the sculpture on his visit to Florence, Poussin would also have been aware of documents like the Andreani woodcut, which reverses Giambologna's original and thus would have encouraged the sort of alteration or adaptation one encounters in Poussin's tandem groups on the



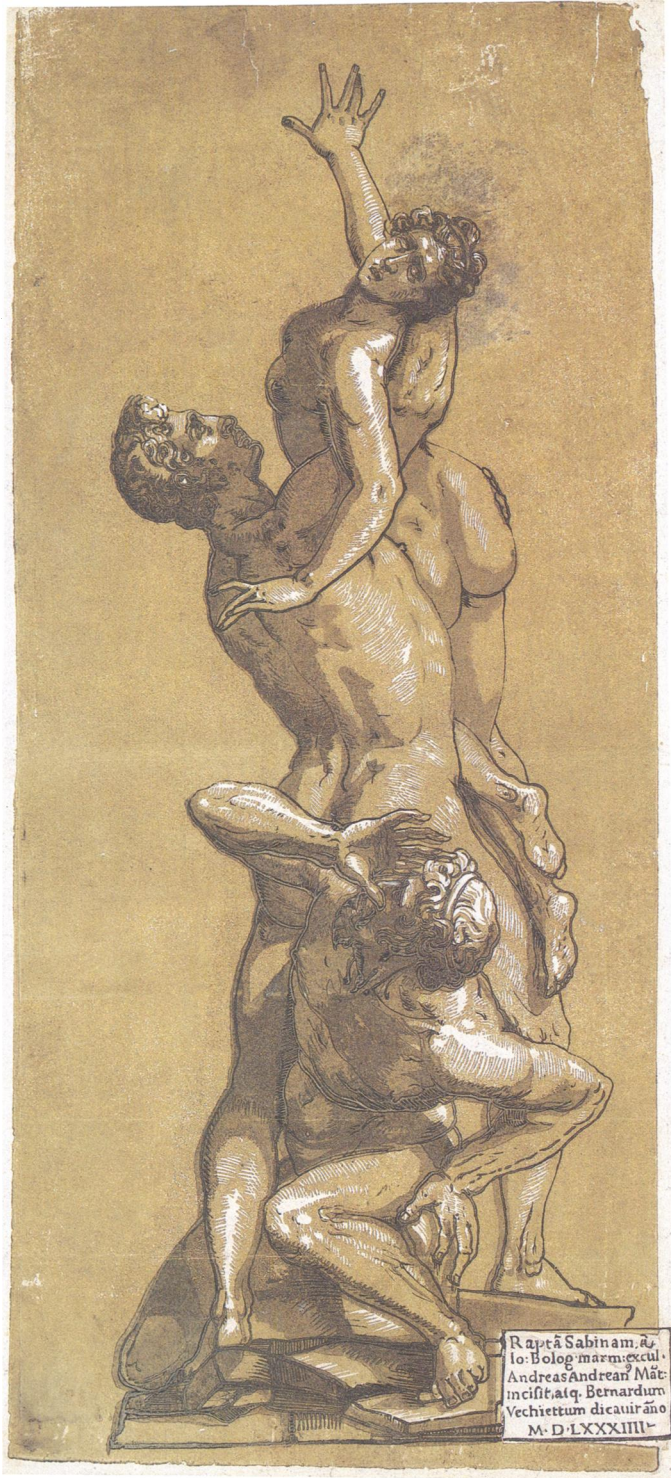
LEFT AND OPPOSITE

**Details of Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women***

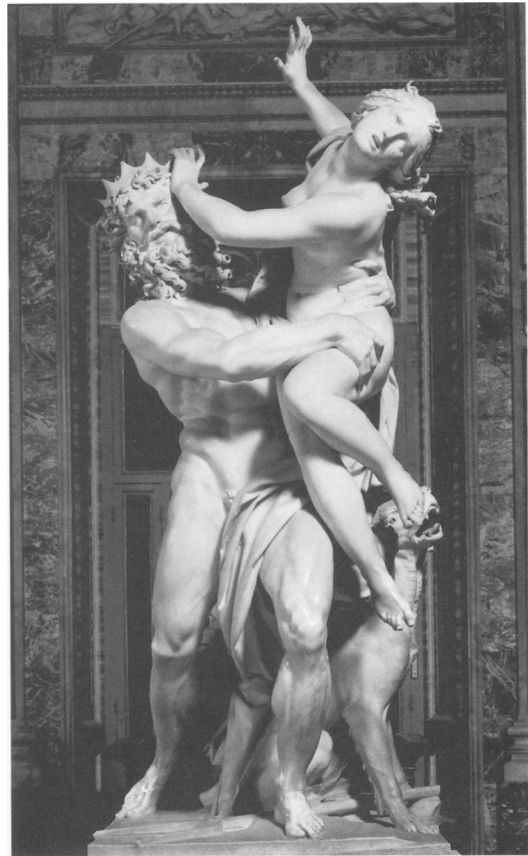








21 Andrea Andreani (1558/59–1629). *Rape of a Sabine Woman*, 1584. Chiaroscuro woodcut after Giambologna's marble sculpture group in the Loggia dei Lanzi, Florence, completed 1583. 18<sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 8<sup>5</sup>/<sub>16</sub> in. (46.4 x 21 cm). Rogers Fund, 1922 (22.73.3–71)



22 Gian Lorenzo Bernini (1598–1680). *The Rape of Persephone*, 1621–22. Marble, h. 100<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (255 cm). Borghese Gallery, Rome

left of the *Sabine Women*. Poussin's own use of large blocks of shadow in his drawings may possibly have been influenced by chiaroscuro woodcuts.

Bernini's 1621–22 *Rape of Persephone* (fig. 22) obviously owes much to Giambologna, but it replaces the earlier sculptor's continuous serpentine shape with a more focused viewpoint. Wonderfully finished on all sides, Bernini's work coalesces best compositionally from a frontal view. His struggling duo, particularly when reversed, anticipates the striking couples on the left of the Metropolitan's painting. The most classical of Baroque artists, Poussin still demonstrated in his *Sabine Women* a shrewd awareness of Bernini's flamboyant sculptural dynamism.

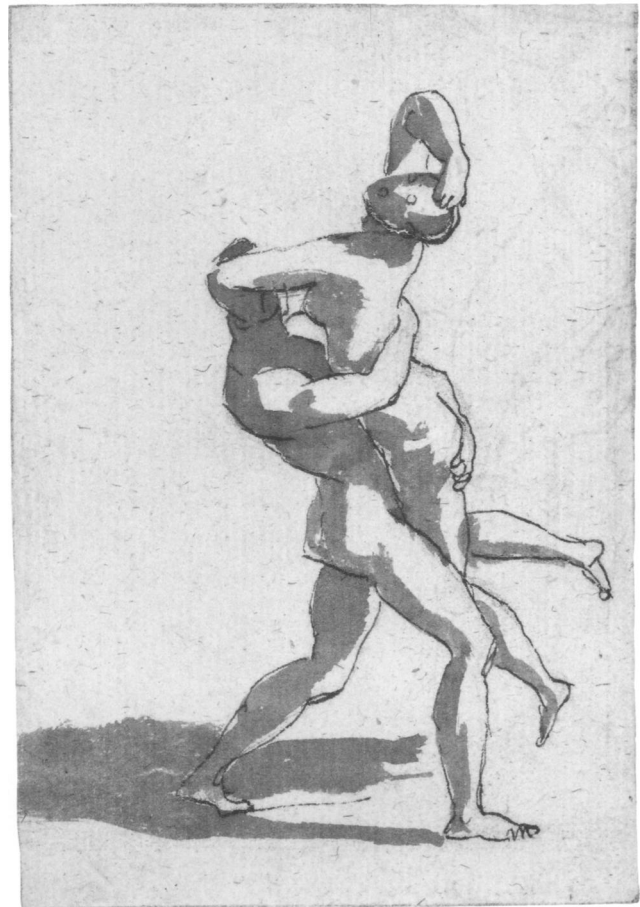
Around the time he painted the *Sabine Women* Poussin was commissioned by Cassiano dal Pozzo to produce a series of drawings of figures in action for an illustrated edition of Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della pittura* (*Treatise on Painting*), based upon an abridged manuscript then in Cardinal Francesco Barberini's library. Although Poussin was later to be deeply dissatisfied with the engraved adaptations of Charles Errard that appeared in 1651, the painter's original drawings are full of energy, complementing what he had seen and studied in sculpture. Poussin's *Trattato* sketches provided another valuable preparation for the figure groups in his roughly contemporary works like the *Sabine Women*. The leap from Poussin's Leonardo manuscript illustration, *Hercules and Antaeus* (fig. 23), to the Windsor pair of *Nude Man Lifting Up a Woman* (fig. 24), an early study for the *Sabine Women*, is not a broad one. In addition, Poussin's work on the *Trattato* increased his familiarity with Leonardo's admonition for artists to define clearly the age, sex, and social stratum of each individual in every composition, strategic advice Poussin always followed.

Since the secondary subject of the *Sabine Women* is the origin of Rome, it is hardly surprising that the resident Baroque master Pietro da Cortona had already painted a grand version of the event in 1625 (fig. 25). The considerably larger dimensions of Cortona's composition are given even greater impact by the scale of his foreground protagonists, one powerful group spanning almost the whole height of the picture. Overall Cortona's touch is softer, more painterly than Poussin's. If Cortona's composition shares Poussin's indebtedness to classical friezes, it is far less effective at suggesting clearly demarcated depth.

Cortona's principal recessionary device involves a dramatic diminution in scale, seen most obviously on the left. There the eye moves abruptly, from full-size foreground figures, to half-size middle-ground figures, to distant figures no more than one-sixth of the original scale. Poussin's spatial organization is integral to his narrative clarity, far greater than in Cortona's picture, where King Romulus is a minor footnote and the dynamic movements of natural elements and draperies are as important as the identities of the protagonists.



23 Nicolas Poussin. *Hercules and Antaeus*, early 1630s. Illustration for Leonardo da Vinci's *Trattato della pittura*. Pen and wash drawing on paper. Ambrosiana Library, Milan. From Friedländer and Blunt, *Drawings of Nicolas Poussin*, vol. 4, no. 265



24 Nicolas Poussin. *Nude Man Lifting Up a Woman*, ca. 1633. Study for *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. Pen and wash on paper. Windsor Castle, Royal Library. © 1992 copyright Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II





25 Pietro da Cortona (1596–1669). *The Rape of the Sabines*, 1625. Oil on canvas, 108 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 166 $\frac{1}{2}$  in. (275 x 423 cm). Capitoline Museum, Rome

An even more striking contrast to the Poussin can be seen in the similar-sized, contemporary version of *The Rape of the Sabines* (fig. 26) painted by Peter Paul Rubens, Poussin's posthumous antagonist in later French Academy debates over the relative importance of color and line (for at least two centuries after Poussin's death, extending through the opposition of Delacroix and Ingres, French artists would be divided into color-captivated "Rubénistes" and line-loving "Poussinistes"). Rubens garbed his women in contemporary Flemish costume, hardly more anachronistic than his inventive Baroque restatements of background architecture and figure types. His abductors seize Sabine women so bounteously ample that the mesomorphic men can scarcely lift them, much less carry them off. The protagonists' movements are part of an overall compositional sweep that, apart from its general orientation to the diagonal, has little to do with geometry. For example, Rubens would never have made the blades of three converging weapons suggest the shape of a perfect pentagon, as Poussin did near the center of the Metropolitan's painting (see p. 35). Furthermore, unlike Poussin's statuesque overseer, Rubens's Romulus conducts uncertainly from his curule chair in the upper right, providing an elliptical climax to much clumsier choreography below.



26 Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640). *The Rape of the Sabines*, late 1630s. Oil on canvas, 66  $\frac{7}{8}$  x 93 in. (169.9 x 236.2 cm). National Gallery, London

Over a century and a half later, Poussin's most gifted artistic "grandson," Jacques-Louis David, offered a denouement to the tumult of the earlier picture. In 1799, after almost five years of labor, David completed his *Intervention of the Sabine Women* (fig. 27) and made a great deal of money charging each viewer almost two francs to examine his epic allegorical image of post-Revolutionary reconciliation. Taking up Poussin's story some years later, when the Sabine men had steeled their courage to reclaim their wives, David showed the women—now deeply settled into domesticity with their former kidnappers—deploying their vulnerable beauty and recent offspring to halt the renewed conflict. Not only did David conclude the narrative begun in Poussin's *Sabine Women*, but he reconstituted the older master's style with such success that his Neoclassicism dominated French academic practice for the next half century, much in the way Poussin's own approach had in the fifty years following his death.

In the early 1860s Edgar Degas worked for a year at the Louvre to complete a full-sized copy (fig. 28) of Poussin's second version of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*. According to the Irish writer George Moore, a friend of the artist, Degas's work was "as fine as the original." Certainly the picture documents the





Detail of Poussin's *The Rape of the Sabine Women*





27 Jacques-Louis David (1748–1825). *Intervention of the Sabine Women*, ca. 1795–99. Oil on canvas, 152 x 204 in. (385 x 522 cm). Musée du Louvre, Paris



28 Edgar Degas (1834–1917). *The Rape of the Sabines*, ca. 1861–63. Copy after Poussin's version in the Louvre. Oil on canvas, 59 x 81½ in. (149.9 x 207 cm). Norton Simon Foundation, Pasadena, California

reverence of the acerbic Impressionist for the sharp focus and compositional richness of the earlier master. Degas's replica demonstrates that even in the second half of the nineteenth century Poussin's rigorous sense of application and compositional structure still had serious supporters amid the lightening freedoms of French art.

Often quoted with regard to Poussin is a letter in which he mentions adapting for painting the Greek notion of five musical modes: Phrygian, Lydian, Hypolydian, Ionian, and Dorian. Poussin did not know (nor do we) what these types of music actually sounded like, but he applied his conception of them to his painting. Although many of Poussin's works fall outside the artist's description of such modes, some pictures clearly exemplify the categories. Phrygian he defined as "vehement, raging, harsh," and the Metropolitan's *Rape of the Sabine Women* certainly epitomizes this mode. The Dublin *Deposition* (fig. 29) is an example of the Lydian mode, which the artist considered appropriate "for pitiable situations." In this late masterpiece the dead Christ's magnificent body was borrowed from a drawing by Michelangelo that inspired the figure in the *Deposition* by Sebastiano del Piombo at Viterbo. Christ's resting right and raised left arm form part of an interrupted, sagging ellipse of deep sorrow, expressed in a sequence of tender and demonstrative grieving hands.

The Metropolitan's late drawing of the *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (fig. 30) has been related to the Dublin work, although its central trio much more closely reprises the group from an early *Deposition* (fig. 31) now in Saint Petersburg (as well as figures from Raphael's *Entombment* in the Borghese Gallery). Forsaking his distinctive blocks of wash, Poussin shaded the drawing with hatching, which descends diagonally from upper right to lower left. The more orderly pattern of parallel lines contrasts with the sweeping curves that delineate the figures. Situated in the center, Mary is posed much like the Madonna of Michelangelo's *Pietà*, although it is Saint John and a triangular block below that provide the principal support for the collapsing Christ. The varied poses of the other characters offer a grammar of grief, ranging from the delicate tear-dabbing of the standing figure on the extreme right to the crumpled agony of the next personage to the left, who appears physically ill. In the left distance are visible the three crosses, one barely discernible behind the standing mourner. Christ's central cross is shown with an adjusted horizontal bar. His body is defined with a frisson of lines descending past the knees. Such expressive quivers document the palsy—called by the artist his "trembling hand"—that afflicted Poussin in his late years and made working so difficult.

The Ionian mode, described as "of a joyous nature," can be applied to the *Youth of Bacchus* (fig. 11). The Hypolydian, incorporating "a certain sweetness

29 Nicolas Poussin. *The Deposition*, ca. 1657. Oil on canvas, 37 x 51¼ in. (94 x 130.2 cm). National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin

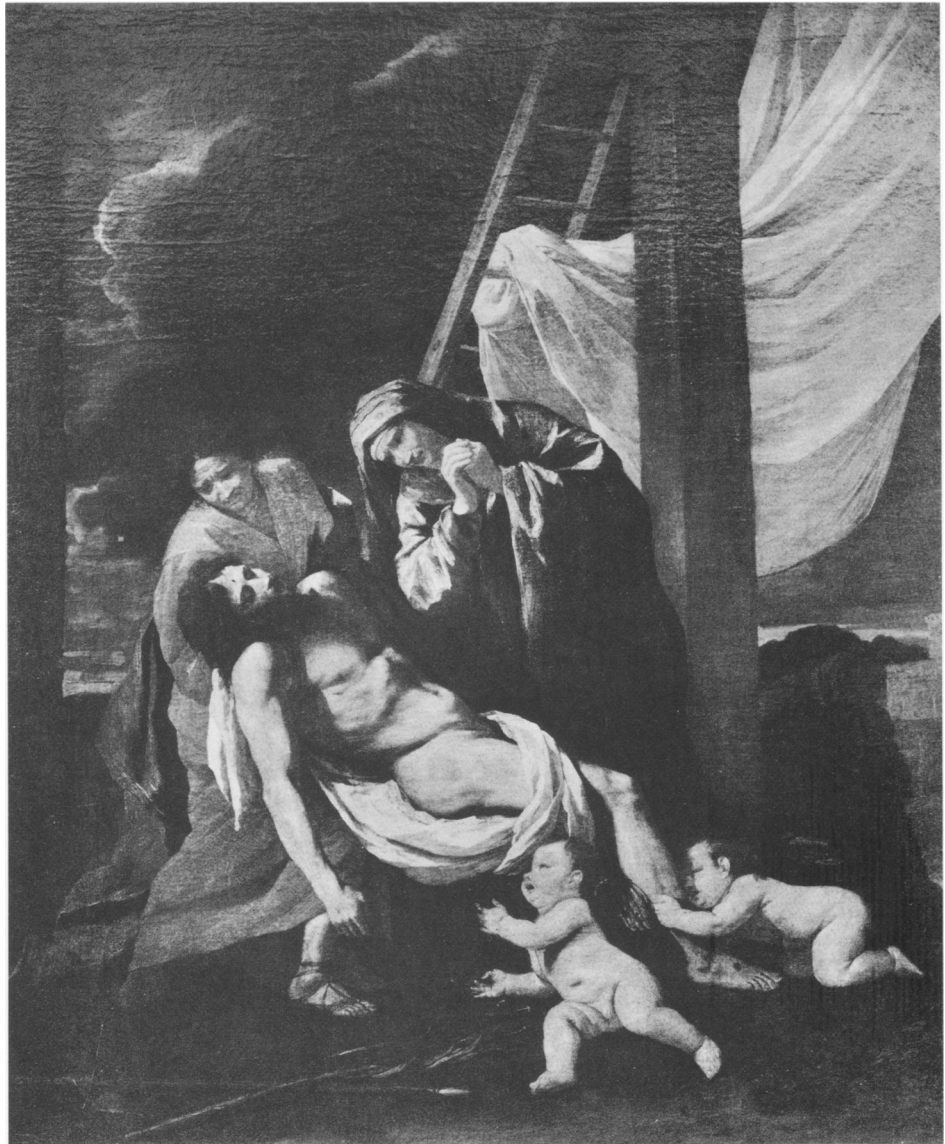


30 Nicolas Poussin. *Lamentation over the Dead Christ*, late 1650s. Pen and brown ink, 3⅞ x 6⅞ in. (8.7 x 15.5 cm). Rogers Fund, 1961 (61.123.1)





31 Nicolas Poussin. *The Deposition*, ca. 1630. Oil on canvas, 47 x 39 in. (119.4 x 99.1 cm). Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. Reproduced in Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, vol. 2, no. 30, pl. 52. Thomas J. Watson Library



and softness,” Poussin deemed “suitable for religious subjects, glories and images of heaven,” such as his ascending Virgin or his Saint Paul, both now in the Louvre, while the “balanced, solemn, and severe” Dorian describes his most carefully crafted stoic landscapes, like the celebrated pair of pictures concerning the remains of the unjustly condemned Phocion (in the Cardiff Museum and Liverpool’s Walker Art Gallery, respectively).

*Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man* (fig. 32) is also best described as a Dorian work, and it is one of the finest examples of Poussin’s complex and austere late style, which Bellori and other subsequent critics dubbed the artist’s *maniera magnifica* (magnificent manner), after a phrase employed by the painter himself. Strongly inspired by Raphael, particularly by the Renaissance master’s tapestry cartoons, Poussin’s later compositions feature richly interwoven architectural angles and tightly but creatively disposed figures.







32 Nicolas Poussin. *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*, ca. 1655. Oil on canvas, 49½ x 65 in. (125.7 x 165.1 cm). Marquand Fund, 1924 (24.45.2)



33 Nicolas Poussin.  
*Madonna of the Steps*,  
ca. 1648. Oil on canvas, 28½  
x 44 in. (72.4 x 111.7 cm).  
Cleveland Museum of Art,  
Leonard C. Hanna, Jr.,  
Fund, 81.18

Another masterpiece of this style, the *Madonna of the Steps* (fig. 33), crystallizes geometric coherence and architectural convergence in an ordered clarity that can be fully appreciated when compared to the busy profusion of accessories in an earlier sketch from the Morgan Library (fig. 34). Raphael not only offered a general compositional influence for the *Madonna of the Steps*, but also provided the specific prototypes for Poussin's figures of Mary and Jesus in his *Madonna of the Fish* (fig. 35). The complex interactions of *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man* are also staged around a wide triangle, but its larger cast demanded more elaborate choreography.

The biblical story, in chapter 3 of the Acts of the Apostles, gives all the words and action to Peter, whose vocal exhortation and physical assistance produced the first miracle performed by any apostle after Christ's death: the raising up of a lifelong cripple to walk at the entrance to the temple in Jerusalem. In giving John rather than Peter the first physical contact, Poussin departed from the biblical text. His younger apostle lifts the left hand of the afflicted beggar to where it almost reaches the descending right hand of Peter and simultaneously points skyward with his left hand to indicate the source of their newfound powers. Thus poised before touching, the hands of Peter and the cripple echo Michelangelo's pregnant interval between the hands of Adam and God on the Sistine ceiling. In both cases the divine spark invisibly leaps



34 Nicolas Poussin. *The Holy Family*, ca. 1645. Black chalk, pen, and wash on paper, 7 $\frac{1}{4}$  x 9 $\frac{7}{8}$  in. (18.4 x 25.1 cm). Pierpont Morgan Library, New York



35 Raphael (1483–1520). *Madonna of the Fish*, 1514. Oil on canvas, 84 $\frac{5}{8}$  x 62 $\frac{1}{4}$  in. (215 x 158 cm). Prado, Madrid

the short distance to animate intractable matter. Quite likely, compositional exigencies pushed Poussin to ignore the fact that in the biblical account the cripple's right hand received the transmitted healing.

In his letters Poussin explained how he wished viewers to "read" his pictures. Art historians have spoken of his visual "rhetoric," and how he derived from the classical tradition the use of clear mimetic gestures for his figures and the division of the picture into principal and subsidiary actions. Thus the rich central focus of *Saints Peter and John* comes as the culmination of other lesser groupings, which establish their distinctive organizational patterns without threatening the unity of the whole. Figures on the right lead us to the central action. An ascending and descending group, studies in movement and counter-movement, create a near-perfect rhombus as they pass on the stairs. The caryatid-like woman bearing a basket on her head at the extreme right receives a distant echo from a slimmer figure between the columns of the temple facade at the left. From the lower left, where the more mundane gift of alms is dropped to the begging mother on the steps, the viewer is led upward to Peter's dramatic dispensation of healing. As in the *Madonna of the Steps* (fig. 33), unexpected and felicitous falls of light animate the soft extremities of the poor woman's child.

Théodore Gericault based his interesting sketch after the Metropolitan's painting (fig. 36) upon an engraving, since his work reverses the picture's composition. Much in the way Poussin himself might have done, Gericault set up major compositional oppositions of horizontals and verticals, and boldly constructed principal figures with strong contours and potent blocks of shadow, while he eliminated some secondary subjects. Thus was Poussin, the great student and reconstructor of antiquity, himself rephrased by the early nineteenth century's most intense and promising adapter of classical energy.

The passion of Poussin's late work may not be so immediately obvious as in the rainbow-hued efforts of his youth. Nevertheless, passion remained a central concern, and his methods for its portrayal parallel those of such seventeenth-century French dramatists as Corneille and Racine, a comparison made more feasible by contemporary theatrical observance of the three unities of time, place, and action. Thus the events in most classical plays transpire in one place over the course of one day. Classical characters all speak in the alexandrine meter, a restriction the dramatists turned to the same expressive use as Poussin's visible order. Their clarity of self-analysis makes their steadfast devotion to reason and virtue or their emotional deviation and downfall from it all the more poignant. Poussin achieves his "unities" through his pictorial structure and his gestural characterization, creating a coherence of surface geometry, recessional space, and complexly linked psychology among his protagonists.

OPPOSITE

Detail of Poussin's *Saints Peter and John Healing the Lame Man*







36 Théodore Géricault  
(1791–1824). *Saints Peter and  
John Healing the Lame Man*.  
Drawing after Poussin's  
painting with the composi-  
tion reversed. From the  
"Carnet Zoubaloff," folio 69,  
Cabinet des Dessins, Musée  
du Louvre, Paris



While the parallel to drama has been noted posthumously, in Poussin's own era painting was often linked to poetry. Horace's maxim *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) was used to argue that good painting and good poetry must seek, through a similar imitation of human action, the expression of truth. Such ageless wisdom was properly embodied in well-known subjects, incorporating a wide range of emotions and including a message both instructive and pleasing. Then, as now, Poussin's works were offered as paradigms of such an approach.

**P**oussin formed his art from a mix of such revered and disparate influences as the antique, Raphael, and Titian, and from his closer classicizing predecessors, the Carracci and Domenichino. Even artists to whom Poussin bore no apparent similarity, such as Giambologna, Caravaggio, and Bernini, provided him with raw material. His heterogeneous successors included rigorous or aspiring classicists like Jacques-Louis David and Alexandre Cabanel, Rococo or Romantic masters like Sir Joshua Reynolds (who owned the Metropolitan's *Blind Orion*, fig. 39), Jean-Baptiste Greuze, Théodore Géricault, and Eugène Delacroix, and precursors of modern art like Edgar Degas and Paul Cézanne. Exceptional innovators like Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse tightened their compositional skills by copying Poussin's work. Thus Poussin provides a central crossroads in the history of French painting, without which major movements fail to connect or to make coherent sense.

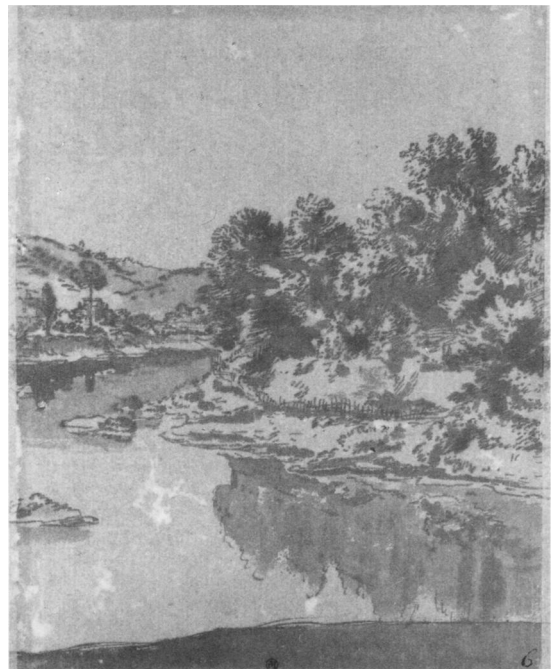
Perhaps Poussin's most intriguing relationship was with his friend Claude



Lorrain. That the two greatest French artists of the period should both have passed their careers far away in Rome seems surprising, particularly when Louis XIV, the Sun King, succeeded his father at mid-century as the most powerful monarch and one of the most munificent art patrons in Europe. That both artists should have played separate key roles in the development of landscape painting is even more unexpected. They were friends who sometimes studied together; Sandrart described riding to Tivoli with Poussin and Claude “to paint or draw landscapes from nature.”

Comparing two handsome drawings by the artists helps us grasp something of their different approaches. Poussin’s *A Wooded Bank Along the Tiber* (fig. 37) was done outdoors, at a stretch of the river that Blunt has identified as just above the Ponte Molle. It is a work in which Poussin, as a landscape draftsman, conjoined two opposing traditions, those of ideal Italian line and expressive northern shadow. The Italian approach, represented by artists like Domenichino and Annibale Carracci, employed a range of linear sequences to order the forms and patterns of the landscape under the strong southern sun. The northern procedure reflected its origins in a more ominous and capricious weather cycle with its emphasis on an alternation of light and shade, a chiaroscuro that shapes outdoor drama. Poussin’s *Tiber* landscape mixes the staccato pen punctuation of the Italians with the rich and dramatic shadows of the northern draftsmen.

Representing the view from Monte Mario, near Raphael’s Villa Madama, where the artist frequently sketched, Claude’s view of the Tiber (fig. 38) is one of the greatest of all landscape drawings. Rivaling the abbreviated eloquence of Chinese paintings, Claude’s singular work is purely the product of a loaded brush and a “blotting” technique, without the lines to undercut its atmosphere or restrict the saturated mood. In regard to its lighting, the sweeping breadth and contrast of Claude’s drawing support the conventional



37 Nicolas Poussin. *A Wooded Bank Along the Tiber*, ca. 1640. Pen and brown wash, 6<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub> x 5 in. (16.4 x 12.8 cm). Musée Fabre, Montpellier

38 Claude Lorrain (Claude Gellée, 1604/5?–1682). *Landscape with the Tiber from Monte Mario*, ca. 1650. Wash drawing, 7<sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 10<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (18.5 x 26.8 cm). British Museum, London, Bequest of Richard Payne Knight



wisdom that he commonly chose the more spectacular effects of sunrise and sunset (a northern preference, despite successfully embodying Italian pastoral themes in his work), while the detail and focus of Poussin's sketch suggest that his illumination reflects the even clarity of high noon.

**P**ainted about 1658, *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun* (fig. 39) is one of Poussin's most memorable late landscape masterpieces, in which he applied his "magnificent manner" to the riches of nature. Each of the Metropolitan's three great Poussins provides an eloquent visual treatise: the *Sabine Women* offers a poetics of movement, the *Saints Peter and Paul* a poetics of space, and the *Blind Orion* a poetics of atmosphere. In its harmonious unity of mood and setting, Poussin's *Blind Orion* competes favorably with the miraculous landscapes of his friend Claude and simultaneously recaptures the Venetian poetry of his youth, now cooler, calmer, and significantly refined after a lifetime of picture making and observation.

Like its execution, the subject of the painting is richly complex, almost without precedent or successor in the history of art. It has been evoked with surpassing eloquence by William Hazlitt and discussed with formidable erudition by E. H. Gombrich. Orion, the giant of the picture, had three divine fathers, Neptune, Jupiter, and Apollo, who symbolized the elements of water, air, and fire (in this case embodied by the sun). Blinded by the goddess Diana for attempting to rape the nymph Aerope, Orion had to seek the rising sun to regain his sight.

In Poussin's picture Orion is directed in his quest by a workman from Vulcan's forge, Cedalion, who rides atop his shoulders, and Vulcan himself,



who stands alongside the road below. The central, stormy clouds upon which Diana leans are both a metaphor for Orion's evil deed and a symbol of his origins, since clouds represent the commingling of his paternal triumvirate of air, water, and sunshine. The changing mists suggest a cycle of suffering and reconciliation, while the blasted tree stumps and dark cave add a sinister evocation of spent sexual violence and passion.

Although also created during the seventeenth century, the Orion from Jacques Bellange's drawing at the Morgan Library (fig. 40) could hardly be more different from Poussin's fee-fi-fo-fum giant, and it illustrates how far behind Poussin had left the persisting French Mannerist preoccupation with elaborate surface ornamentation. Bellange's light invention embodies the flamboyance and excesses of that late Mannerist style in which Poussin grew up and to which his mature Baroque classicism evolved as stylistic and moral corrective. Poised on his toes, Bellange's Orion gently caresses, both with his loving gaze and his right hand, the goddess Diana, whom he carries effortlessly on his shoulders. Bellange embellishes Orion's Roman costume with outlandish fringes and furbelows, so that almost every line of the drawing flutters like windblown drapery.

Poussin's Orion, on the other hand, appears modeled in clay or hewn from the same magnificent chestnut trees and ilex, or evergreen oak, that exceed his great height. He plods forward flat-footed, his left arm extended tentatively for balance and protection in spite of the clear directions Cedalion seems to offer from his position atop the giant's shoulders. Orion's dynamic course into the painting is charted by the trails of vapor that pass beside him (opening up just enough to allow a blue halo of sky around his head) and create the solid cloud formation that supports Diana, who, in her insouciant pose, shows no sign of sympathy for the colossus's soon-to-be-cured disability. The chilly moon goddess is a pale blue, with her right arm catching some of the distant sunshine that illumines the edge of the gathering clouds. Sacheverell Sitwell's notes for his two eloquent poems on the painting suggest that "she will fade out of the sky as soon as Orion recovers his sight."

Poussin's landscapes relate to natural scenery in the same way as his heroic figures relate to everyday people; his "classicism" is a refining and restructuring through art. In discussing *Blind Orion*, Hazlitt wrote:

To give us nature, such as we see it, is well and deserving of praise; to give us nature, such as we have never seen but have often wished to see it, is better and deserving of higher praise.... *His* art is a second nature, not a different one.

A Sacheverell Sitwell couplet suggests the special atmosphere of the Metropolitan's picture:

This past is another land, a place of air,  
Clear air on hills and softly whispering winds....







39 Nicolas Poussin. *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*, 1658. Oil on canvas, 46<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 72 in. (119.1 x 182.9 cm). Fletcher Fund, 1924 (24.45.1)



40 Jacques Bellange (active 1602–16). *The Hunter Orion*, ca. 1610. Pen and brown wash, 13<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 7<sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (35 x 20 cm). Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

Gombrich's discussion of *Blind Orion* has shown how Poussin's subject was inspired by Lucian's classical text and enriched by Natalis Comes's contemporary mythological commentary, which turns Orion's story into an allegory of the elements: "the drama of the circulation of water in nature." The giant supporting a figure on his shoulder relates the theme more generally to the whole question of artistic heritage and influence, and the oft-repeated quarrel between the merits of the "ancients" and the "moderns." As anthologized with great wit and erudition by Robert K. Merton in his book *On the Shoulders of Giants: A Shandean Postscript*, the frequently repeated literary image of a dwarflike modern thinker building on the achievements of the titans of the past can be connected with Poussin's pairing of Orion and Cedalion to invoke the nature of originality and influence. A formulation of this recurrent metaphor dating from Poussin's own time was offered by Père Marin Mersenne, a learned friar of the Minim mendicant order who was well acquainted with Descartes and the young Pascal. In his 1634 publication, *Questions Harmoniques, dans lesquelles sont contenües plusieurs choses remarquables*

*Blind Orion* serves to illustrate one of the most complex of Poussin's connections to subsequent art, his relationship with Paul Cézanne. Distinguished scholars have argued the authenticity of the quoted goal attributed to Cézanne: "to re-do Poussin over again after Nature." But there can be little doubt that some affinity of heroic resolution or synthesis of disparate parts unites the two artists in a common "classical" spirit. When *Blind Orion* is set alongside Cézanne's epic *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, now in the Courtauld Institute Galleries (fig. 41), the drastic differences in handling, color, and subject matter are muted by the basic similarities of pictorial construction. The swirling aerial expansion of Cézanne's pine branches is paralleled by the profuse growth of Poussin's mighty oaks and the burgeoning Baroque accumulation of his darkened, gilt-edged clouds. In both pictures the distant mountain focuses and anchors all the surrounding subsidiary activity. This remarkable pairing of the methodical Poussin and the persevering Cézanne also offers convincing evidence that the more valid stereotype for a great painter is not the facile prodigy but the driven and inspired workman who "neglects nothing" in the struggle to achieve elusive pictorial harmonies.

OPPOSITE

Detail of *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*







*pour la Physique, pour la Morale, et pour les autres Sciences (Harmonic Questions, in Which Are Contained Several Remarkable Things for Physics, for Morality, and for the Other Sciences)*, Mersenne wrote:

For, as is said, it is quite easy and even necessary to see farther than our predecessors, when we are mounted on their shoulders: a situation which does not prevent us from being deeply in their debt.

Thus, in addition to its previously cited wealth of suggestive meaning, Poussin's great landscape also can be read as a hieroglyph of his own career role and his goal as an artist. Poussin was both a rediscoverer and extender of (as well as guide to) the heroic achievement of antiquity, in his own time the painter most clearly standing "on the shoulders of giants." Thus did a man frequently perceived as a synthesizer see beyond the ancient vision, becoming, in the admiring words of Delacroix, "one of the most imposing innovators which the history of painting has to offer."

As his lifetime of painstaking labor drew to a close, Poussin had certainly earned some autumnal ease. The last eyewitness testimony about the painter came less than six months before his death, from the artist-dealer Abraham Breugel, who told the collector Don Antonio Ruffo that Poussin "does nothing other than occasionally enjoy a little glass of wine with my neighbor Claude Lorrain." Although Claude would survive Poussin by more than a decade and a half, the description of such distinguished friends sharing good conversation and *un petit verre* up to the end offers a delightful closing image.

Poussin's death deserved to be marked by greater gravity. The declaration of his brother-in-law Jean Dughet to Chantelou intoned an appropriate note of emphatic solemnity: "Your Highness has no doubt heard of the death of the famous M. Poussin, or rather, of painting itself." Yet painting was hardly dead. For nearly two and a half centuries after Poussin's demise, his works would enrich, stimulate, and restrain the great European academic tradition. Ironically, but thanks in no small part to his example, artistic preeminence passed

41 Paul Cézanne  
(1839–1906). *Mont  
Sainte-Victoire*, ca. 1887.  
Oil on canvas, 26¼  
x 36¾ in. (66.8 x 92.3  
cm). Courtauld Institute  
Galleries, London







**Detail of *Blind Orion  
Searching for the Rising Sun***

from his adopted Italy to his native France soon after his death. Poussin's subject paintings and his landscapes can be daunting in their intricate construction, but they are artifacts of the true painter, not "too precise in every part," but invariably strengthened with "sweet disorder." Even if their erudition and elaboration make quick appreciation difficult, their concentrated natural beauty and heroic human activity offer an important message for anyone willing to look closely. Poussin still has a story to tell. The viewer who has carefully studied some of Poussin's assiduous efforts (duplicating the detailed observation already profitably made by many subsequent artists) can certainly join with Cézanne in saying:

By looking at the work of a master, I hope to get a better sense of myself; every time I come away from Poussin I know better who I am.

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## PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

Color photography of Museum works by Patricia Mazza of The Metropolitan Museum of Art Photograph Studio. Black-and-white photographs by the staff of the Photograph Studio and contributing institutions unless otherwise noted. Fig. 2: Réunion des musées nationaux. Fig. 4: Frédéric Jaulmes. Fig. 5: Lauros-Giraudon. Fig. 7: Photographie Giraudon. Fig. 8: Alinari/Art Resource. Fig. 10: Réunion des musées nationaux. Fig. 11: Réunion des musées nationaux. Fig. 14: Courtauld Institute of Art. Fig. 22: Soprintendenza per I Beni Artistici e Storici di Roma. Fig. 25: Archivi Alinari. Fig. 27: Réunion des musées nationaux. Fig. 36: Réunion des musées nationaux. Fig. 37: Frédéric Jaulmes.

## NOTES

Poussin correspondence: The letter in which Poussin explains why he had to paint his own portrait for Chantelou dates from August 2, 1648, and the reference appears on p.132, in Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres et propos sur l'art*, edited by Anthony Blunt, Paris, 1964: "J'aurais déjà fait mon portrait pour vous l'envoyer, ainsi comme vous désirez. Mais il me fâche de dépenser une dizaine de pistoles pour une tête de la façon du sieur Mignard, qui est celui que je connais qui les fait le mieux, quoique froids, pilés, fardés et sans aucune facilité ni vigueur." The letter in which Poussin describes his ill health to dal Pozzo dates from about 1629, and the reference is on p.25 in Blunt: "J'ai pris, cette fois encore, l'assurance d'écrire la présente, ne pouvant moi-même venir la saluer, par la raison d'une indisposition qui m'est survenue, pour la supplier de toutes mes forces de m'aider en quelque chose, en ayant tant besoin parce que, la plupart du temps, je suis malade, alors que je n'ai aucun revenu pour vivre autre que le travail de mes mains." The letter in which Poussin suggests his pictures will not displease those who know how to "read" them was written about his painting *The Israelites Gathering Manna* to fellow artist Jacques Stella about 1637. The passage in which he describes details and aspects of the painting as "choses, comme je crois, qui ne déplairaient pas à ceux qui les sauront bien lire" is published in Blunt on p. 27. The letter in which Poussin explains the modes of Greek music was written to Chantelou on November 24, 1647, and is published on pp. 121–125 of Blunt.

Page 3: Although Anthony Blunt's excellent new edition of Chantelou's *Diary of the Cavaliere Bernini's Visit to France*, Princeton, 1985, makes this important document available in English, the first French edition, with Bernini's remarks frequently given in Italian, appeared in a sequence of articles presented by Ludovic Lalanne in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, beginning in August 1877. The quotes I have cited are, in order: "O il grande favoleggiatore!"; "Il signor Poussin é un pittore che lavora di là"; "Voi m'avete dato oggi un grandissimo disgusto, mostrandomi la virtù d'un uomo che mi fa conoscere che non so niente."

Page 6: Giovanni Pietro Bellori's life of Poussin was part of his *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, first published in Rome, 1672, and reprinted in Rome, 1931.

Page 7: The words spoken by Marini to Cardinal Barberini, "Vederete un giovane che à une furia di diavole," appear in Roger des Piles, *Abrégé de la vie des peintres*, Paris, 1715, p. 459.

Page 10: Poussin's quote on Caravaggio was recorded by André Félibien in his *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellents peintres anciens et modernes*, Trévoux (Paris) 1725, vol 3, p. 194: "M. Poussin. . .ne pouvait rien souffrir du Caravage, et disait qu'il était venu au monde pour détruire la peinture."

Page 14: Joachim von Sandrart's invaluable information on the lives of many important seventeenth-century painters, originally published in 1675–79, is contained in his two-volume *Teutsche Academie* . . . , edited by A. R. Pelzer, Munich, 1925. The quote about the visit to see the Titian bacchanals is on p. 270 and the reference to the Tivoli sketching tour on p. 184.

Page 19: Panofsky's essay "*Et in Arcadia Ego: On the Conception of Transience in Poussin and Watteau*" first appeared in *Philosophy and History, Essays Presented to Ernst Cassirer*, edited by R. Klibansky and H. J. Paton, Oxford, 1936, pp. 223–254, and was later reprinted as "*Et in Arcadia Ego: Poussin and the Elegiac Tradition*" in Panofsky's *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, New York, 1955, pp. 295–320.

Page 34: A reference to Degas taking a year to make a copy of Poussin's *Sabines* "as fine as the original" appears in George Moore, *Impressions and Opinions*, London, 1891, p. 321.

Page 49: For quoted material from William Hazlitt and Sacheverell Sitwell, see references cited under Special Studies of Metropolitan Paintings.

Page 52: Cézanne's comment about "redoing Poussin" was first recorded by Charles Camoin in 1905 (see Charles Morice, "Enquête sur les tendances actuelles des arts plastiques," *Mercur de France*, no. 56, August 1, 1905, p. 353) and mentioned as a remembered remark from 1904 by Francis Jourdan ("A propos d'un peintre difficile, Cézanne," *Arts de France*, no. 5, 1946, p. 7). The history of the statement is detailed by Richard Shiff in *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism*, Chicago, 1984, pp. 180–183.

Page 54: Père Marin Mersenne's remark is quoted in Robert K. Merton, *On the Shoulders of Giants*, New York, 1985, p. 76: "...car, comme l'on dit, il est bien facile et mesme nécessaire de voir plus loin que nos devanciers, lors que nous sommes montez sur leurs espauls: ce qui n'empeshe pas que nous leur soyons redevables." Delacroix's quote comes from his essay on Poussin published in *Moniteur Universel*, on June 26, 1853: "On a tant répété qu'il est le plus classique des peintres, qu'on sera peut-être surpris de le voir traité dans cet essai comme l'un des novateurs les plus hardis que présente l'histoire de la peinture." The famous quote by Abraham Breugel, a notable still-life painter as well as an art dealer, was first printed in Vincenzo Ruffo's article (which includes many other documents) entitled "Galleria Ruffo nel Secolo XVII in Messina" in *Bolettino d'Arte*, Roma, 1916, p. 173. It states that Poussin "adesso non fa più niente altro che delle volte per diletto d'un bicchierino di vino buono con mio vicino Claudio Lorenese, et apunto hieri sera bevessimo alla Sanità di V.S. Ill.ma (Prince Ruffo)...."

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BACK COVER: Detail of *The Companions of Rinaldo* (fig. 15)

