

Poussin

Nicolas Poussin 1594 – 1665 was the leading painter of the classical French Baroque style, although he spent most of his working life in Rome. Most of his works were on religious and mythological subjects painted for a small group of Italian and French collectors. He returned to Paris for a brief period to serve as First Painter to the King under Louis XIII and Cardinal Richelieu, but soon returned to Rome and resumed his more traditional themes. In his later years he gave growing prominence to the landscapes in his pictures. His work is characterised by clarity, logic, and order, and favors line over colour. Until the 20th century he remained a major inspiration for such classically-oriented artists as Jacques-Louis David, Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and Paul Cézanne.



The Death of Germanicus 1628

Classical Greek and Roman mythology, history and literature provided the subjects for many of his paintings, particularly during his early years in Rome. His first successful painting in Rome, *The Death of Germanicus*, was based upon a story in the *Annals of Tacitus*.

The subject is drawn from *The Annals of Tacitus*, Books II, LXXI, LXXII: Germanicus (15 B.C.A.D. 19), the son of Nero Claudius Drusus, was a famous and extremely popular Roman general who carried out several successful military campaigns in Germany. He was named commander of the eight legions of the Rhine by his uncle Tiberius, who was then Emperor. Recalled to Rome in A.D. 16, his warm reception by the populace inflamed the jealousy and fear of Tiberius who immediately sent him to the East to remove him from the public eye. In the meantime, Tiberius also made Piso, an ambitious member of the Roman nobility, the governor of Syria and ordered him to spy on Germanicus' movements. When Germanicus unexpectedly died while in Syria, Piso and his wife Plancina were accused of poisoning him, supposedly at Tiberius' instigation. Although the prosecution was unable to prove that Germanicus had, in fact, been poisoned, Piso's subsequent suicide was construed as a cover-up. This gave further credence to the widespread suspicion that Tiberius, or even his mother Livia, was behind the murder.

Poussin was thirty when he arrived in Rome in 1624. The new Pope, Urban VIII, elected in 1623, was determined to maintain the position of Rome as the artistic capital of Europe, and artists from around the world gathered there. Poussin could visit the churches and convents to study the works of Raphael and other Renaissance painters, as well as the more recent works of Carracci, Guido Reni and Caravaggio (whose work Poussin detested, saying that Caravaggio was born to destroy painting). He studied the art of painting nudes at the Academy of Domenichino, and frequented the Academy of

Saint Luke, which brought together the leading painters in Rome, and whose head in 1624 was another French painter, Simon Vouet, who offered lodging to Poussin.

With the departure of Vouet from Rome in 1627, Poussin became the most prominent French painter in Rome. Until 1630, he had painted rapidly ("with the fury of a demon", Marino recorded)[24] and produced large numbers of pictures of variable quality. Thereafter, he renounced seeking commissions for large decorative works, which were prestigious but required competitions and came with many restrictions, and concentrated instead on painting for art patrons and collectors, for whom he could work more slowly and develop his own subjects and style.

Return to France (1641–42)

As the work of Poussin became well-known in Rome, he received invitations to return to Paris for important royal commissions, proposed by Sublet de Noyers, the Superintendent of buildings for Louis XIII. When Poussin declined, Noyers sent his cousins, Roland Fréart de Chambray and Paul Fréart, to Rome to persuade Poussin to come home, offering him the title of First Painter to the King, plus a substantial residence at the Tuileries Palace. Poussin yielded, and in December 1640 he was back in Paris.

The correspondence of Poussin to Cassiano dal Pozzo and his other friends in Rome show that he was appreciative of the money and honors, but he was quickly overwhelmed by a large number of commissions, particularly since he had taken the habit of working slowly and carefully.

He was also expected to provide designs for royal tapestries and the front pieces for books from the royal printing house. He was also subjected to considerable criticism from the partisans of other French painters, including his old friend Simon Vouet. He completed a painting of the Last Supper (now in the Louvre), eight cartoons for the Gobelins tapestry manufactory, drawings for a proposed series of grisaille paintings of the Labors of Hercules for the Louvre, and a painting of the Triumph of Truth for Cardinal Richelieu (now in the Louvre). He was increasingly unhappy with the court intrigues and the overwhelming number of commissions. In the autumn of 1642, when the King and court were out of Paris in Languedoc, he found a pretext to leave Paris and to return permanently to Rome.

Final years in Rome (1642–1665)

He lived an austere and comfortable life, working slowly and apparently without assistants.

Religion and mythology were the most common subjects of his paintings, as the church was the most important art patron in Rome and because there was a growing demand by wealthy patrons for devotional paintings at home.



Et in Arcadia Ego late 1630's

Allegories of death are common in Poussin's work, One of the best-known examples is *Et in Arcadia ego*, a subject he painted in about 1630 and again in the late 1630s. Idealized shepherds examine a tomb inscribed with the title phrase, "Even in Arcadia I exist", reminding that death was ever-present. [



The Rape of the Sabine Women c1638

Use of the word "rape" comes from the conventional translation of the Latin word used in the ancient accounts of the incident: *raptio*. Modern scholars tend to interpret the word as "abduction" as opposed to (sexual) violation.

The Rape (or abduction) occurred in the early history of Rome, shortly after its founding by Romulus and his mostly male followers. Seeking wives in order to establish families, the Romans negotiated unsuccessfully with the Sabines, who populated the surrounding area. The Sabines feared the emergence of a rival society and refused to allow their women to marry the Romans. Consequently, the Romans planned to abduct Sabine women during a festival of Neptune Equester.



A Dance to the Music of Time 1640

A fertile source for Poussin was Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi, who wrote moralistic theatrical pieces which were staged at the Palace Barberini, his early patron. One of his most famous works, *A Dance to the Music of Time*, was inspired by another Rospigliosi piece. According to his early biographers Bellori and Felibien, the four figures in the dance represent the stages of life: Poverty leads to Work, Work to Riches, and Riches to Luxury; then, following Christian doctrine, luxury leads back to poverty, and the cycle begins again. The four women who dance represent the different stages and are

distinguished by their different clothing and headdresses, ranging from plain to jeweled. In the sky over the dancing figures, the chariot of Apollo passes, accompanied by the Goddess Aurora and the Hours, a symbol of passing time.



Landscape with the Ashes of Phocion 1648

Poussin is an important figure in the development of landscape painting. In his early paintings the landscape usually forms a graceful background for a group of figures, but later the landscape played a larger and larger role and dominated the figures, illustrating stories, usually tragic, taken from the Bible, mythology, ancient history or literature. His landscapes were very carefully composed, with the vertical trees and classical columns carefully balanced by the horizontal bodies of water and flat building stones, all organized to lead the eye to the often tiny figures. The foliage in his trees and bushes is very carefully painted, often showing every leaf. His skies played a particularly important part, from the blue skies and gray clouds with bright sunlit borders (a sight often called in France "a Poussin sky") to illustrate scenes of tranquility and the serenity of faith, such as the Landscape with Saint Jean at Patmos, painted in the late 1630s before his departure for Paris; or extremely dark, turbulent and threatening, as a setting for tragic events, as in his Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe (1651). Many of his landscapes have enigmatic elements noticeable only with closer inspection; for example, in the center of the landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe, despite the storm in the sky, the surface of the lake is perfectly calm, reflecting the trees.



Self Portrait 1650



Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun 1658

The legend of Orion was first told in full in a lost work by Hesiod, probably the *Astronomia*. This version is known through the work of a Hellenistic author on the constellations; he gives a fairly long summary of Hesiod's discourse on Orion. According to this version, Orion was likely the son of the sea-god Poseidon and Euryale, daughter of Minos, King of Crete. Orion could walk on the waves because of his father; he walked to the island of Chios where he got drunk and attacked Merope, daughter of Oenopion, the ruler there. In vengeance, Oenopion blinded Orion and drove him away. Orion stumbled to Lemnos where Hephaestus — the lame smith-god — had his forge. Hephaestus told his servant, Cedalion, to guide Orion to the uttermost East where Helios, the Sun, healed him; Orion carried Cedalion around on his shoulders. Orion returned to Chios to punish Oenopion, but the king hid away underground and escaped Orion's wrath. Orion's next journey took him to Crete where he hunted with the goddess Artemis and her mother Leto, and in the course of the hunt, threatened to kill every beast on Earth. Mother Earth objected and sent a giant scorpion to kill Orion. The creature succeeded, and after his death, the goddesses asked Zeus to place Orion among the constellations. Zeus consented and, as a memorial to the hero's death, added the Scorpion to the heavens as well.

The Four Seasons c1660-64

The last set of four oil paintings completed by Poussin. The set was painted in Rome for the Duc de Richelieu, the nephew of Cardinal Richelieu. Each painting is an elegiac landscape with Old Testament figures conveying the different seasons and times of the day. Executed when the artist was in failing health suffering from a tremor in his hands, the Seasons are a philosophical reflection on order in the natural world. The iconography evokes not only the Christian themes of death and resurrection but also the pagan imagery of classical antiquity: the poetic worlds of Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Virgil's *Georgics*. The paintings currently hang in a room on their own in the Louvre in Paris.

“ By his absolute humility, by his effacement of himself, by his refusal to use any tricks or overstate himself, Poussin has succeeded in identifying himself with nature, conceived as a manifestation of the divine reason. The Seasons are among the supreme examples of pantheistic landscape painting. ”

— Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*

The Seasons are a continuation of Poussin's mythological landscapes, depicting the power and grandeur of nature, "benign in Spring, rich in Summer, sombre yet fruitful in Autumn, and cruel in Winter." The series also represents successive times of the day: early morning for Spring, midday for Summer, evening for Autumn and a moonlit night for Winter. For both stoic philosophers and for early Christians the seasons represented the harmony of nature; but for Christians the seasons, often depicted personified surrounding the Good Shepherd, and the succession of night and day also symbolized the death and resurrection of Christ and the salvation of man

Departing from the traditions of classical antiquity or medieval illuminations, where the

seasons were represented either by allegorical figures or by scenes from everyday country life, Poussin chose to symbolize each season by a specific episode from the Old Testament.



Spring

Shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden from Genesis



Summer (Ruth and Boaz)

Boaz discovering Ruth gleaning corn in his fields from the Book of Ruth.



Autumn (The Spies with the Grapes of the

Promised Land)

The Israelite spies returning with grapes from the promised land of Canaan from the Book of Numbers.



Winter (The Flood)

The Flood from the Book of Noah.

In addition to the obvious seasonal references, some commentators have seen further less immediate biblical references. The bread and wine in Summer and grapes in Autumn could refer to the eucharist. The whole sequence could also represent Man's

path to redemption: his state of innocence before the original sin and the Fall in Spring; the union that gave rise to the birth of Christ through the House of David in Summer; the Mosaic laws in Autumn; and finally the Last Judgement in Winter.



Apollo and Daphne 1664

In his later years, his mythological paintings became more somber, and often introduced the symbols of mortality and death. The last painting he was working on before his death was Apollo in love with Daphne, which he presented to his patron, the future Cardinal Massimi, in 1665. The figures on the left of the canvas, around Apollo, largely represented vitality and life, while those on the right, around Daphne, were symbols of sterility and death. He was unable to complete the painting because of the trembling of his hand, and the figures on the right are unfinished.