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Alexandre Dalle April 8, 2022

Poussin and the Vernacular: a humanist canvas

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Bachelor of Arts with Honors

Art History

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Abstract

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Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) defined French academic art for over three centuries after his passing. His work was used as the cornerstone in the creation of French artistic identity, being used as a model by artists such as Charles Lebrun and Jacques-Louis David a century later. Yet there is no contemporary scholarship consensus on the artistic vernacular of Poussin. My thesis aims to answer this question by examining different Poussin over a large extent of his career and examine the humanistic influences that translated in his work. Each chapter analyses two paintings from a particular time period of Poussin's career. These chapters include the early years of Poussin in Rome alongside the circle of Marino's poets, Poussin as an antiquarian and his study of Antiquity, and finally Poussin and his interactions with the French royal court and politics. Poussin's vernacular is not a singular entity, it is an amalgamation of multiple humanistic ideals he acquired over the course of his career. One of these humanistic ideals is the study of antiquity which since his early career he perfected in order to become a historical painter with an acute knowledge of classical art, classical architecture, and classical literature. By the late 1640s, Poussin's political opinion was much more noticeable in his painting during the epoch of the Fronde, his art encapsulating his tumultuous relationship with Cardinal Mazarin's court. This period coincides with a majority of Poussin's patrons comprising of French intellectuals replacing his Italian patrons. Poussin's fame by French patrons is a major paradox of Poussin's career, how did a French painter who lived almost exclusively in Rome become so important for French cultural identity as a whole, especially when he painted mostly for a select group of humanist patrons? Through careful analyses of Poussin's paintings, his writings in letters, and modern-day scholars' studies of Poussin I will attempt to shed light on the complexing artistic vernacular of Poussin.

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Acknowledgments

I have many people to thank for supporting me over the course and this year for helping accomplish my goal in writing this thesis.

I would first like to thank my adviser, Dr. Melion, for teaching me over the last two years and helping push my interest in the arts on a more critical level, as well as encouraging my professional writing. Dr. Melion has helped me find my path in art history and supporting my ambition of writing this thesis. I would also like to thank Dr. Melion for supporting my application to the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry's Undergraduate Honors Fellowship, which I am incredibly grateful for. I would also like to thank my committee member Dr. Pastan who has, for the past two years, in conjunction with Dr. Melion, encouraged me to engage with the class material and develop my interest in the field of art history. The support of Dr. Pastan has resulted in the creation of some of my best research work and submission for the Dorothy Fletcher Prize. Dr. Melion and Dr. Pastan have both contributed to me continuing to push forward in my academic journey despite the turbulent years of teaching under the global pandemic. I would also like to thank my last committee member, Dr. Varner, for his continued support over the years and for making me discover my passion in classical Antiquity. It is thanks to people like you that I have had four of the most wonderful years at Emory. Merci pour tout.

In addition, I have to give a very special thank you to my parents, Jean-Baptiste and Iris Dalle, who have continuously supported me not only in my thesis but in my major of Art History over these past four years. It is thanks to them that I have been able to grow and complete my undergraduate academic journey. I must also thank my brothers, Louis Dalle and Hector Dalle for standing by my side during long nights of studying under lockdowns. I must also thank my grandparents Patrice and Catherine Carde for their unrelenting aid in discussing and writing my thesis. I must also thank Pierre Rosenberg for taking the time to discuss my thesis during its inception and for his guiding advice. I would also like to thank Crina Pop for her encouragement in my work. Finally, I must thank my colleagues from the Art History Group: Emma Lazerson, Isabelle Bracewell, Sojourner Hunt, and Elise Williams for their continued support and advice every Sunday and for helping me keep my morale while working on this paper. It has been an incredible year spent along your side, thank you.

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Forward

Before beginning with this paper, I feel the need to explain how this subject came about and also situating my work in relation to existing scholarship on the work of Nicolas Poussin. I first had the idea to work on this project after Dr. Melion's class, ARTHIST 475, on the History of Early Modern European Printmaking, between 1400-1700. During this class, I worked on a paper on the humanist influences, notably the humanist influence of Erasmus, in Hieronymous Bosch's artistic work. This interest in humanistic movements' impacts on artists sowed the seed in my interest to explore this subject further. I decided to study the work of Bosch and his imitator Pieter Brueghel the Elder, in relation to another painter known for his humanistic interest, Nicolas Poussin. While the two artists were separated by over a century, I wanted to compare both their humanistic influences and the cultural precedent both artists set forth for their respective burgeoning new native countries. This project interest was further cemented during my internship at the Eric Turquin art appraisal cabinet. I had access to one of the most extensive private documentation on western renaissance painters between 1400 and 1700. In this documentation, I noticed that the number of French artists in the documentation increased drastically after the 1650s and into the late seventeenth century. While there are many reasons for this, independent of Nicolas Poussin, such as the creation of the Académie Royal de peinture et de sculpture and Paris becoming a cultural center for artists, I could not help but notice that one of these first major artists was Nicolas Poussin. It is during this time I decided my thesis subject had to be narrower and I decided early in the Fall 2021 semester to dedicate my work solely to researching the humanistic influences in Nicolas Poussin's artistic vernacular and examine why he was vital in creating a template for French artists to follow.

During my research process, I noticed a standing debate between researchers of Poussin. I wish to clarify the stance of my paper in relation to this debate. Many researchers were critical of each other's work and openly refuted ideas or written works by one another. This made navigating my subject in Poussin's vernacular difficult as I had to avoid directly criticizing the works of researchers while also being critical of certain of their arguments. For example, Pierre Rosenberg was instrumental in my research and his writings provide invaluable information on analyzing the work of Poussin and how to "read" his canvases. However, I did not agree with his criticism of Todd Olson's work, notably Rosenberg's dismissal of Poussin's Frondist interactions suggested by Olson. My paper leans more towards Marc Fumaroli and Todd Olson's view of Poussin, as an artist that was as much a humanist and a scholar as a painter who engaged with themes outside of the scope of academic painting. However, this paper does not discredit the work of Pierre Rosenberg and Anthony Blunt, there is an academic, and neoclassic, side to Poussin's painting. This paper aims at navigating between two sides of an argument and constructing a thesis based on the information from multiple scholars that may not agree with one another. While I cannot say my work is a bridge between researchers, it is a paper that aimed at giving a fuller picture of Poussin's humanistic influences by stepping back from previous debates. Like the work of poussin, this paper is a conversation that will be continued for years to come and is meant to stand on its own as well as engage with previously written literature.

Introduction

Nicolas Poussin is one of the most famous French artists of the seventeenth century. The latter half of the seventeenth century is marked with the emergence of France, notably Paris and Versailles, as the largest center in cultural and political life in western Europe. The emerging centralized country needed a new humanistic discourse for its blossoming intellectual elites, one that could rival the humanistic capital that was Rome a couple of decades earlier. Nicolas Poussin was at the forefront of this movement, his work moving to become the foundation for the arts of the state-controlled Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture in Paris. The Académie under Charles LeBrun would use Nicolas Poussin as its primary model and would remain so for over a century.

Despite his popularity among his peers, and his work being studied for over three centuries, Poussin's career remains shrouded in uncertainty. Most of Poussin's letters have not survived aside from a few correspondences. This has led many scholars to speculate and disagree on how to analyze Poussin's work. Poussin moved to Rome early in his career and his closest relationship both in Italy and France were part of intellectual circles of poets, merchants, antiquarians, and art collectors. His versatility in the field of letters has led scholars to debate on how to define Poussin as an artist, was he a philosopher, a poet, or an academic painter? Or perhaps was Poussin's art a combination of these traits? Extensive research was done by scholars to answer individual parts of this question, often examining a single period or mode that Poussin used in his work. This thesis aims at addressing this lack of a comprehensive examination of Poussin's influences over his career rather than through a singular point in time. My thesis will examine the humanistic movements Poussin used to

create his own artistic vernacular, one that would become synonymous with seventeenth-century French art.

To accurately answer this question, my process involves studying closely his paintings as well as deciphering Poussin's artistic language through close examination of his interactions with different humanistic movements. Poussin gravitated towards intellectual circles such as was the case with the poetic circle of Marino who Poussin became acquainted with upon arrival in Rome. Yet before Poussin even departed for Rome, he had already frequented the artistic scene of Paris in his youth. Poussin had already received an education in the arts before he departed for Rome, studying in Paris before finally leaving the capital only to return briefly for no more than two years later in his career. The thirst chapter of this paper will examine the crucial formative years of Poussin, both in Paris and in the poetic circles of Rome, and how they cemented early humanistic ideals in Poussin's artistic vernacular.

Chapter 1
Poussin the Painter-Poet

What is most striking about the career of Nicolas Poussin, and a reason for much scholarly debate is his decision to leave Paris at the age of twenty-eight for Rome, in the year 1624. While young painters were expected to go to Rome at some point in their career, what sets Poussin apart is that as a painter, he never came back to Paris aside from a brief stay in Paris in the 1640s, choosing to settle in Rome among a circle of friends introduced by his first sponsor and friend, Giambattista Marino. Poussin's relationship to the poet Marino and his circle of friends heavily impacted the future of Poussin's painting, not only by drawing the painter to Rome but by introducing him to classical works that would come to constitute the

basis of his painting in a vernacular idiom or language, as recognized and celebrated by Poussin's peers and patrons. This chapter aims to examine what impact poetry had on his early career and identify the humanist elements introduced by Poussin in response to the poets with whom he became familiar.

First, it is worth mentioning that Poussin already had exposure to poetry long before his eventual departure to Rome. Poussin was well versed in Latin, having learned it from an early age, according to Nicolas Poussin's first biographer, Giovanni Bellori[1]. Alongside his knowledge of Latin, Poussin was exposed to an academic circle in Paris, due to where he lodged during his stay in the capital. Although Poussin was not a student at the College of Laon, today the university of *La Sorbonne*, he resided within its walls, among other students. It was an area that served as the central Parisian hub of cultural and ideological exchange.[2] Outside of poetry, the cultural hub Poussin resided in was also the catalyst for his first encounter with Philippe de Champaigne, a testimony to the cultural elite that was based in the area. Latin poetry was much read by 17th-century French audiences, both by established elites and students. One such author whose work was in high demand was the Roman poet Ovid, especially his epic-lyric *Metamorphoses.*[3] It was at this time that Poussin most likely became familiar with the poem, and he would produce several works based on the *Metamorphoses*, such as *Cephalus and Aurora* and *Apollo and Daphne* among many others. The interest Poussin already displayed in Latin poetry before his encounter with Marino is often overlooked yet it shows that even as a young aspiring painter, he shared certain literary tastes characteristic of humanist-inclined readers. Poussin also went on numerous expeditions to Fontainebleau where he was exposed to numerous works such as the frescoes by Rosso

[1] Jacques Thullier, *Nicolas Poussin, Lettres et Propos sur L'Art* (Hermann, Paris, 2014) 8.
[2] Jean Jacques Lévêque, *La vie et l'œuvre de Nicolas Poussin* (Courbevoie, Paris, 1988) 92.

[3] Lévêque, *La vie et l'œuvre de Nicolas Poussin,* 90.

Fiorentino.[4] This exposure to Italian art in France nurtured his desire to venture to the eternal city, where Marino had promised to sponsor him. Even before meeting Marino, Poussin had tried to leave for Rome, unsuccessfully, failing to reach the city due to insufficient funds.[5] This early formative period certainly influenced his painting style and partially explains the reason his paintings were popular among French patrons; notably, it is during this time period that Poussin discovered an interest in biblical history when he was commissioned to paint a series of six paintings, now lost, for the Jésuite order.[6] This first successful commission brought attention to the young artist such as the attention of Marino. Biblical history would become a central component of Poussin's artistic vernacular later in his career. It is also during his years in Paris and Lyon when Poussin became fascinated by antiquarianism and classical history, another notable humanistic interest which he would perfect while living in Rome. Poussin was already imbued with French humanistic ideals before he even departed for Rome.

However, the importance of the encounter Poussin had with Marino cannot be overestimated. Whereas Marino didn't create the interest Poussin had for Rome, he supplied the means whereby Poussin traveled to Rome, as well as access to patrons and connections that would allow Poussin to settle in the Italian capital[7]. One crucial figure whom Marino introduced to Poussin was Cassiano del Pozzo, a future patron, and friend of the artist. Poussin's arrival in Rome quickly led to a major shift in his painting style, causing him to assimilate elements of a new Roman identity which he continued to cultivate during the 1630s and 1640s. Most influential was the poetics nurtured within the circle of Marino.

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[4] Thullier, *Nicolas Poussin, Lettres et Propos sur L'Art,* 9.
[5] Thullier, *Nicolas Poussin, Lettres et Propos sur L'Art,* 10.
[6] Pierre Rosenberg and Renaud Temperini, *Poussin : « Je n'ai rien négligé »* (Gallimard, Paris, November 1994) 18.
[7] Thullier, *Nicolas Poussin, Lettres et Propos sur L'Art,* 10.

Figure 1: Nicolas Poussin, L'Inspiration du Poète, 1629-30, oil on canvas. 183.4 X 213cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

While Marino commissioned no paintings from Poussin, he nevertheless possessed a number of drawings from the artist, the so-called "Marino Drawings,"[8] now preserved at Windsor Castle in the UK. Robert Simon notes that Marino's imaginary *Galleria* contains striking similarities with some of the early works produced by Poussin: "Many of the compositions mentioned in Marino's Galleria depict mythological themes treated by the young Poussin."[9] In addition, Simon argues that certain works by Poussin were directly inspired by Marino's poetry, "Furthermore, Poussin seems to have read Marino's poetry like a mythographic handbook, extracting and incorporating visual descriptions of the gods and their legends.[10]" Poussin drew upon Marino's poems as a source of inspiration, using them as a template for some of his works such as *The Realm of Flora*, *Perseus and Andromeda*, and *Venus and Adonis Hunting*, among others. The poetic paintings of Poussin demonstrate interactions between Marino and Poussin that went beyond letters or dialogue. The interactions became a codified poetic language between them, highlighting the high degree of familiarity and cultural affinity the two men shared. Poussin's mingling with the poetic circle of Rome gave rise to several paintings that make specific references, such as

[8] Jane Costello, "Poussin's Drawings for Marino and the New Classicism: I. Ovid's Metamorphoses." (*Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, Vol. 18, No. 3/4 (Jul. - Dec., 1955), pp. 296-317), 296.

[9] Robert B. Simon, "Poussin, Marino and the interpretation of mythology." *The Art Bulletin*, Vol 60, No 1, pp55-68, (March 1978): 56.

[10] Simon, *Poussin, Marino and the interpretation of mythology,* 64.

with *The Realm of Flora*, a painting filled with botanical reference in response to Marino's "poetic garden" where flowers were attributed to specific poems in his notes.[11] Marino's influence on Poussin is best demonstrated by Poussin's increasing attention to the poetic mode and the references he would make to Marino's written work, such as by drawing from Marino's *Adone* in his painting. It was also Marino that introduced Poussin to patrons that already were interested in poetry which meant that Poussin was often commissioned for the purpose of creating canvases with poetical themes. Poussin's close relation to Marino and Cassiano made him the pictorial muse of the poetic mode; he had to develop a poetic language in painting that could transmit the lyrical themes he discovered with his circle of patrons. This poetic "vernacular" mode, codified and recognized by the circle of friends Poussin, contributed to his early success abroad. The term "vernacular" is employed as Poussin was not only including a poetic mode in his painting but engaging in a conversation with his poetic circle of patrons, adopting the poetics not just stylistically but as an artistic language. The poetic language can be observed in several paintings, notably *The Inspiration of the Poet* and *Et in Arcadia Ego*, two of Poussin's most recognized works.

The *Inspiration of the Poet* was painted four years after Marino's death in 1625. While this means it was not commissioned by or for Marino, it was still made early in Poussin's career when his connections to Marino's circle of poets were well established. The painting represents many key elements of Poussin's early manner of painting, notably, as the title of the work suggests, their characteristic emphasis on a poetic theme. It is important to consider, however, that the title of the painting was added much later and that scholars continue to debate the picture's subject and theme. In addition, the identity of the work's patron remains unknown. According to Marc Fumaroli, the identification of the models has been equally difficult, with no consensus on whether Poussin makes reference to the marinist poet Marcello

[11] Marc Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle* (Paris, Flammarion, 1994), 88.

Giovaneto or the neo-Latin poet Virgilio Cessarini.[12] Fumaroli's identification of these poetic referents raises an interesting point: this work could have been made in collaboration with Marino's circle of friends and poets. The painting depicts Apollo, seated, crowning a poet, possibly Virgil or a contemporary of Poussin, as a putto and a muse stand by Apollos' side, the scene taking place in a wooded landscape at the end of a plain. In the painting three books can be observed, the *Odyssey*, the *Iliad,* and the *Aeneid*.[13]-- three poetic epics, two Greeks and one Roman grouped together alongside Apollo, god of poetry. The connotation is clear: the painting praises the Greek poet Homer while elevating Virgil by claiming his poetry to be the equal of Homer's. The foundations of poetry are not just Greek, but Roman as well. Considering that the painting praises Roman poetry and that it was commissioned for someone either directly involved with Marino's circle of poets or familiar with it, the poetic rhetoric would not have been lost on the viewer. The painting can almost be seen as a continuation of this poetic tradition, made for the circle of Marino, praising Roman poetry while implying an affiliation between the work's owner and the lineage of inspired poetry, Greek to Roman, adduced by the three books. This would be especially fitting if the poet in the pictures is construed not as an individual but as a personification of the poetic genre, as exemplifying Marino's circle of poets by elevating the poetic genre rather than a singular poet. It would explain why the poet is ambiguous in his possible attribution, especially considering Poussin's attention to detail would hardly make his lack of distinctness a coincidence. It is also no coincidence that the three title poetic works in the canvas are Greek and Latin epic poetry. Through epics, poetry can become more than a lyrical work and instead become a narrative work. Epic poetry shows the versatility of the poetic mode, able to convey grand-scale narrative works which serve as some of the earliest pieces of writings in Western

[12] Pierre Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre* (Paris, Louvre éditions, September 2015), 87.

[13] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 87.

culture. Poussin's canvas specifically celebrates not only by including them in his work but also in the scale of the canvas. Poussin's canvas is noteworthy for its size: it is one of Poussin's largest works,[14] the significance of which should not be overlooked. The impressive size contributes to the idea of the grandeur poetry, its monumentality. The *Inspiration of the Poet* stands out to this day in the Louvre next to the other smaller paintings of Poussin.

Historical context supports this argument, Marc Fumaroli discusses the fact that humanist movements of the 16th and 17th century in Italy aimed at elevating poetry to the rank of other arts and sciences, "la poésie, élévée a la fonction de « théologie poétique » presque égal en dignité à la théologie dogmatique et mystique."[15] This elevation of poetry was accomplished in a multitude of ways, from elevating poetry in the arts. Poussin elevated poetry by likening the Pope with Apollo, a conjunction of the papal image to a patron of music, poetry, and the arts.[16] If the Pope was Apollo then Poussin and Marino's circle of poets were the muses, driving forward the implementation of the poetic mode in painting and literature. This humanist concept, of Rome and the pontiff as heralds of poetry and the arts was adopted by Poussin and adapted into his painting of the *Inspiration of the Poet*. The meaning of Poussin's painting was a language that his circle of friends and patrons would have understood and would have used to decipher the symbology of the painting. It is a poetic diction made through allusions to epic poetry, namely by crowning the figures in the canvas, a reference to the epic poetry being considered as one of the foremost poetic modes. Contrastingly, Pierre Rosenberg sounds a note of caution, arguing that while Poussin was marshaling poetic devices, images, and tropes, his primary goal was to fashion a visually striking, pleasing composition, made above all to delight: "il y'a de la part de Poussin ce désir constant, Durant toute sa carrière, d'accorder la primauté à la peinture, au laisir de l'oeil, à

[14] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 84.
[15] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 69.
[16] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 66.

cette “délectation” que des lectures trop nombreuses empechent parfois de pleinement gouter.[17]”

However, while it is true that Poussin took great care in creating visually pleasing works of art, this does not suggest that the academic use of delectation and poetic painting were mutually exclusive. The *Inspiration of the Poet* is striking even apart from its historical context, namely, the subtle poetic codes that would have been understood by the friends of Poussin and Marino. These codes were part of Poussin’s artistic language, nodes to epic poetry and the appraisal of it through the crowning of the figures, details which required intimate knowledge of poetry to fully understand. Poussin navigated both mediums, the academic as well as the literary side of painting to create harmonious works that unify the two together. Poussin was not simply painting the ideals of Marino and his poet friends; he was translating them into his own artistic idiom. As Robert Simon puts it, “for Marino, "the aim of the poet is the marvelous," whereas for Poussin, painting's "aim is delectation.[18]” Poussin’s work references the poetical mode of Marino while striking a balance with an academically speaking, in terms of composition, figures, and colors, pleasing work that could be appreciated outside of the poetical references made in it. Furthermore, the *Inspiration of the Poet* modifies mythology, converting it into an allegory of poetry; Simon states, “study of Marino's poetry reveals the author to be less a paraphraser of a classical myth than an interpreter of it.[19]” If Marino reinterpreted myths in his poetry so could Poussin reinterpret

[17] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre*, 88.
[18] Simon, *Marino and the interpretation of mythology,* 57.
[19] Simon, *Marino and the interpretation of mythology*, 64.

Figure 2: Nicolas Poussin, Et in Arcadia Ego or the Arcadian Shepherds, 1637, oil on canvas. 85 X 121cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

both mythology and poetry in his paintings. Poussin's poetic reinterpretation of classical mythology would become most evident in his following work, *Et in Arcadia Ego*.

Et in Arcadia Ego was painted by Poussin almost eight years after *The Inspiration of the Poet*, partly inspired by Guercino's own version of the same subject, *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1628-22).[20] By then Poussin had settled into his Roman life, marrying Anne-Marie Dughet in 1630. Although the original patron is unknown, the fact that the picture was purchased for the collection of Louis XIV in 1685[21], testifies to the fame of this composition. The scene takes place in the imaginary landscape of Arcadia, a heavenly paradise where a group of shepherds, three men and a woman, encounter a tomb with the inscription, "Et in Arcadia Ego", "And in Arcadia I am". The "I" in the inscription can both refer to death or the

[20] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 155.
[21] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 154.

deceased person in the tomb; in any case, the message is clear, even in Arcadia one cannot escape death.

Two shepherds have not yet realized what the inscription means, the one furthest on the left looking down at his colleague who reads out the inscription while pointing at it. At the right, one of the shepherds looks up in confusion and fear, having realized what the sentence means, looking to the woman for clarification and reassurance. The woman herself stands tall, above the three other shepherds, her face placid, her pose calm and collected; she appears to understand the situation, in contrast to the pathos shown by the three other figures. The identity of the woman is unknown; is she a shepherdess, a Muse, beauty incarnate, or the embodiment of painting as Elizabeth Cropper suggested?[22]

While Poussin's canvas is complex in its theme, the subject matter was particularly popular. Indeed, Arcadia was virtually codified as a pastoral theme in the early 17th-century.[23] As Marc Fuùaroli notes, Arcadia was associated with pastoral scenes not due to geographical reasons but rather due to a likeness in their sharing of values, a degree in communal living, and spiritual fraternity.[24] Shepherds were seen as an embodiment of this fraternal living, and the boundaries between Arcadia and the pastoral were often blurred due to a humanistic romanticization of pastoral life. Yet the reason why Poussin chose to paint this subject can also be explained by its implied significance as a poetic source. Arcadia was identified by poets and their circles as more a mental than a geographical place.[25] The strong association of Arcadia with lyric poetry, as noted by Fumaroli, goes back to the Italian poet Francesco Petrarca, who mentions Arcadia in his *Canzoniere* and *De vita solitaria*; and created a poetically lyrical literary genre that was associated with a cultivated and learned elite.[26]

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[22] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 156.
[23] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 20.
[24] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 25.
[25] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 25.
[26] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 25.

Figure 3: detail of Et in Arcadia Ego (figure 2). The shadow of the shepherd arm imitates the scythe of death

Poussin's poetic diction in *Et Arcadia Ego* is more discrete than in *The Inspiration of the Poet* as it is not referencing epic poetry but rather lyrical poetry. Poetry remains a central part of the composition, through its theme of Arcadia, a name synonymous with poetry in Rome. The composition of the work engages with exploring Arcadia, a theme relevant to Roman poetics and humanistic circles. The subject of Arcadia also happened to gain popularity abroad in France where Italian humanism was adopted. The admiration for the subject matter of Arcadia would transcend boundaries and finds its way into France in the late 17th century, supported by humanist movements that paralleled Arcadia with the growing cultural presence of France; "une Arcadie d'Ile de France"[27] as Fumaroli writes. While the identity of the person who commissioned the work is unknown it does explain why Louis XIV himself took interest in the work and why the painting was brought back to France years later.

The theme of death is equally important to the poetic qualities of the work. Indeed, death is the poetic center of the work. Without death, there would be no beauty in the ephemeral charms of an earthly paradise such as Arcadia, or of beauty in youth. Nothing lasts even in this pagan earthly paradise, it's a reminder to appreciate youth and beauty as they are fleeting, death is what makes these traits special, they are not eternal. Jerome Klein summarizes the theme of death in Arcadia in a single phrase, "death is encountered even among the greatest

[27] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 24.

felicities.[28]" The theme of death is conveyed by Poussin more directly. One does not need to be educated in poetry or humanist thinking to physically see death in the shadow of the scythe, manifested in plain sight projected against the tombstone. This symbolism of death can be most clearly observed through the gesture of the shepherd reading the inscription. The hand of the shepherd is not only a gesture towards the inscription, which reveals the presence of death through writing, it is death itself represented by the shadow of the scythe, under the very hand reading the inscription.[29] The scythe ends at the very start of the inscription, its tip touching the first letter the shepherd is pointing out with his finger. The shadow is emphasized by the fact the other shepherds do not cast a shadow on the tomb, only the knelling shepherds do. This example demonstrates that Poussin was not relying only on poetic language and humanist discourse for people to understand his work; symbolism and composition play a key role in establishing the poetical tone and theme of the scene. Poussin took great care in establishing a clear composition, using syllogism to supplement his poetic diction in order to establish the scene. Poussin presents the premise of lyrical poetry in the figures of the canvas in relation to the elegiac premise of death, both unified in creating a singular poetic work. An attentive exploration of the canvas suffices in giving a clear idea of the work: the central theme of death can be grasped more precisely than the theme of epic poetry in *The Inspiration of the Poet*, which necessitates context. Yet while syllogism and composition played a central role in Poussin's work, figures, and their expressions, remain to be fully explored.

Et in Arcadia Ego displays another theme that would become increasingly central to his work. One of these themes includes the use of expression and symbolism to create a

[28] Jerome Klein, An Analysis of Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego" (*The Art Bulletin*, June 1937, Vol 19, No 2, page 314-17) 314.

[29] Figure 3

narrative through a specific reading of the canvas by examining the figures. This use of *expression* would be developed by Poussin in his later works, notably the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert*. This can be observed not through overall themes themselves but rather through the painted figures' expressions and postures. Poussin uses the visual language of pose, gesture, and countenance to convey new information about the work. Pathos becomes central to the realization that death is present, as the concerned look of the shepherd in red implies. Yet the most indicative of these emotions is conveyed by the woman next to him. Her position in relation to the composition is not accidental; she is the only fully standing figure, her pose emphasized by the tree trunk behind her. She is one of two figures on the right side who balance the two figures on the left. Her placement helps to balance and harmonize the composition, and she is also the figure closest to the viewer, in this sense the most conspicuous. Lost in thought, she appears contemplative. She is a kind of threshold figure, both in the picture and outside it. Standing within but also before the composition, she partially averts her gaze from the event unfolding instead of reflecting upon it. In this way, she functions like an Albertian choric figure, standing in for the viewer reading the canvas. It is a combination of her calm facial expression and her firm, collected body posture that exemplifies and invites reflection. It is by using what Jerome Klein calls "classic moderation,[30]" that Poussin is able to unify the expressions of the other figures in the painting. That is to say that the figures in *Et Arcadia Ego* all correspond with each other; through their differences, they create a unified whole. By using restraint or moderation, Poussin invites the viewer to consider the themes of the painting more seriously, to engage with the picture in the manner that the woman engages with the tomb. Through her, the viewer comes to understand what knowledge the other shepherds lack, their unaware encounter with mortality.

[30] Klein, *An Analysis of Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego,"* 314.

It must be prefaced that this chapter serves as an introduction to the definition of what this paper refers to as "Poussin's vernacular" when discussing Nicolas Poussin's work. Poussin's vernacular should not be confused with artistic modes. The modes used by Poussin, such as the poetic or historical mode, mostly comprise our understanding of what is Poussin's vernacular; however, it does not comprise it by itself. Poussin's vernacular is the artist's sense of engagement, which Poussin would have wanted his viewers, such as his patrons, to understand his work. In the letters from Poussin to Fréart Chantelou,[31] Poussin explains to him how to "read" and interpret his paintings, despite the fact Chantelou was very well aware of the modes used by Poussin. This is best illustrated with the examples already analyzed in this chapter, how Poussin can use multiple modes and is not constricted to one, explaining the malleable nature of Poussin's vernacular. For instance, Poussin switches from epic to lyrical poetry in his work, two very different tones of poetry that make up the artist's vernacular. Both poetic modes are employed by the artist, yet they do not fully embody by themselves what Poussin, or his patrons, understood in his own work. In essence, Poussin's vernacular should be understood as a forward discursive engagement between Poussin and his patrons and not simply understanding it as an artistic mode.

In conclusion, this chapter aimed to analyze the beginning of Poussin's career in Rome and examine how his early career provided a foundation for the humanistic influence in Poussin's work, notably poetry. It is at the beginning of his work that Poussin begins by integrating poetic circles and humanist movements, ideals that are repercussed in his canvases as his primary theme. *Inspiration of the Poet* and *Et in Arcadia Ego* display this poetic language that was central to Poussin's early work, as well as the increased importance of

[31] Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres et Propos sur L'Art*, 135.

composition, especially in *Et in Arcadia Ego*. The circle of Marino influences greatly the work of Poussin who was thrust not only in the historical setting of Rome but also in its cultural life. Poussin quickly adopted the humanist and poetic ideas that his connections made him discover, and he then adapted these Roman cultural traits into his own work. These paintings represent the genesis for the vernacular mode that Poussin employed and adapted from his Roman circle, which was understood by both the Italian elites but increasingly by French patrons emulating the humanist and cultural scene of Rome. While the composition is important in Poussin's work, there remains an underlying current of ideals that composition alone cannot explain, Poussin's work is one not only of poetry but philosophy and history. Poussin would continue to draw inspiration from poetry while also cultivating a newfound interest in Antiquity and history, increasingly creating works that combined the poetic, the Antique, and the historical as distinct modes. These historical works would cement Poussin's fame not only as a Roman painter but ultimately as a French painter, attracting the enthusiastic support of French patrons. The next chapter will explore this phenomenon as well as the new language Poussin would adopt in his painting.

Chapter 2
Poussin a Biblical and Historical Painter

The two paintings on which this chapter focuses are of the utmost interest to the topic of the vernacular mode in Poussin's painting. The *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* (1637-39) and The *Rape of the Sabine Women* (1637-38) chronologically follow the previous paintings, only a few short years before the departure of Poussin to France in 1640. They both represent a departure in the mode used by Poussin, shifting away from poetic language to an emphasis on history and antiquity. While there is a shift in mode, Poussin retains certain

features of the poetic mode familiar from his earlier works. Poussin increasingly incorporated the ancient history of Rome, both in its physical remains and cultural forms, into his paintings, both biblical and pagan. This rise in the prevalence of antiquity in Poussin's work is not accidental; the ancient world was already popular with Roman patrons and increasingly so with the French patrons of Poussin.

Before analyzing Poussin's work, it is essential to look at the somewhat contested and vague term "antiquity" and what it meant for the elites of both France and Rome. Poussin and his close circle were not the only ones to share an interest in classical antiquity. Instead, it was part of a grander cultural revival of classical Rome and Greece operating both in Rome and increasingly abroad, such as in Paris. The French elite was already fascinated by antiquity, notably the Roman Empire, when Poussin arrived in Rome[32]. Indeed, ancient Rome was not just a fleeting curiosity in the seventeenth century but an ideal and inspiration that the elite aimed to acquire. This fascination with the old Roman customs and artifacts is best illustrated by what was believed to be accurate information about the celebration of ancient Rome, emulated by none other than Henri IV, who entered Lyon like a Roman conqueror in September 1595[33]. The entrance used numerous temporary triumphal arches and colonnades erected in honor of the king. Antiquity was as much a political tool as it was a cultural one. The use of antiquity in French politics is not straightforward; there were multiple reasons why associating France with Rome was beneficial. One of the main reasons is that it gave whichever French political party appropriated these forms a certain legitimacy, authorizing them by association with the grandeur of antiquity. The citations, allusions, and usages

[32] Todd Olson, *Poussin and France: Painting, Humanism and the Politics of Style* (Yale University Press, June 1, 2002) 15.

[33] Olson, *Poussin and France, 17.*

elevated French cultural and political life by referencing classical values and ideals claimed by the French as their heritage[34].

Poussin was acutely aware of the importance of antiquity and took an interest in the subject matter. Before Poussin arrived in Italy, he stopped in Lyon, a town that had a particular interest in unearthing the Roman past of Gaulle. According to Todd Olson, the city of Lyon attributed great importance to the Claudian tablet, discovered in 1528, as it appeared directly to connect the city to a Roman past. It provided what Todd Olson would call an "instructional antiquarianism,[35]" where the ancient remains of Lyon, and France, on a larger scale, provided a foundation for the contemporary city. It was precisely these connections to the ancient world that Louis XIII needed, and Louis XIV, after his ascension to the throne, to parallel Paris and France to the Rome of old. Olson emphasizes this point by arguing there

Figure 4: Nicolas Poussin, The Rape of the Sabine Women, 1637-38, oil on canvas, 159 X 206cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

[34] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 30.
[35] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 32.

was a deliberate attempt to forge cultural and political parallels between the two capitals, to "superimpose the Tiber onto the Seine, the Capitoline onto the Louvre.[36]" Poussin had been drawn to the appreciation of Antiquity and figured it profusely in his works, especially in his historical works on pagan subjects. The first painting this chapter will examine, *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, offers a unique insight into Poussin's shift from a poetic mode into a classical mode and why Poussin implemented these changes in his version of canonical *historia*.

The *Rape of the Sabine Women*[37], alternatively known as *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*, was painted by Nicolas Poussin in 1637 and finished a year later in 1638 as a commission for the future cardinal Luigi Alessandro Omodei[38]. It was subsequently sold to the collection of Louis XIV in 1685, a testament that the appeal of the work of Poussin crossed international borders. The painting depicts the mythical founder of Rome, Romulus, at the moment he gives the command to his soldiers to seize the Sabine women who had arrived to view games in the city after accepting an invitation by the Romans. This painting was considered in its day not a mythological but a historical painting about the foundation of Rome. Painters commonly used the subject matter as it was popular with Roman patrons. Jane Costello notes that ancient Roman historical paintings were so popular that Luca Cambiaso had painted the Alessi palace in Genoa entirely with frescoes of the history of Rome, as did the Carracci in the Fava Place in Bologna[39]. Consequently, it is no surprise that this specific subject matter was not the first to be commissioned by Poussin; he had already produced a

[36] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 35.
[37] Figure 4
[38] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 108.

[39] Jane Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women by Nicolas Poussin." *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Vol. 5, pp. 197-204, (April 1947,): 197.

version of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* earlier, 1633-34, which is now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

Aside from the theme of the work relating to ancient history, it may seem, at first glance, that the work is romanticized antiquity based on little classical sources. Yet antiquity takes center place not only in the work's presentation of a theme but also in its vernacular mode of presenting history to the viewer. What makes this painting a historical reconstruction of Rome is the attention Poussin gave in creating what was believed at the time to be historical truth. Anthony Blunt noticed that scaffolding can be seen in the upper right-hand corner of the painting[40]; this reveals the attention to detail with which Poussin depicted the early formative years of Rome when building works would have been prevalent. Poussin wished to capture the authentic experience of the historical event, not just in the subject matter but setting as well. A historical painting required the utmost care in its presentation of the past, which Poussin gradually developed as he began increasingly painting ancient historical subjects. In Poussin's first version of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, Poussin excluded the city in the painting, foregoing the temple and the houses and instead choosing to focus on a landscape. In the second version of the work, Poussin focused more on the architectural details of the background and grounded the action in a city landscape. Despite all the physical artifacts left by the Romans, architecture, statues, and paintings, Poussin underscored his interest in antiquity not with physical objects but by drawing upon ancient Roman literature as a source of inspiration in his historical paintings. Poussin based his cityscape of Rome on Roman literature, notably Vitruvius[41]. Vitruvius was a valuable source in his writings on Roman culture, which would not have escaped Poussin, who carefully studied ancient texts. Vitruvius mentions the tradition of celebrations, from games to religious

[40] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 113.
[41] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 200.

ceremonies, in the Roman forum, a detail that most likely influenced Poussin in his decision to shift his second version of *The Rape of the Sabine Women* away from an envisioned view of Rome towards a version based on the ruins of the Roman forum. The reimagination of a past that was ancient even to the Romans, or rather, how the Romans imagined the founding of Rome, is a testament to Poussin's desire to conform to historical accuracy[42].

While attention to ancient literature was commonplace for the works of Poussin, it only creates an illusion of a realistic environment; but it is the figures who inhabit this environment who truly enact the subject that confers on the picture its status as an *historia*. The term "historia" applies to the manner in which Poussin narrates his historical subjects and offers them up for interpretation. As a narrative work, the figures are extremely important as they serve as the central focus of the historia. As discussed in the previous chapter, Poussin uses the figures' emotions to express the underlying action in the picture. Poussin accentuates emotion by focusing his work not just on facial features but also on expression as conveyed by bodily attitude. Before diving into the use of expression in the work of Poussin, it is first necessary to identify certain important characteristics of the individuals. Jane Costello argues that the depiction of the figures, in the way they are positioned, is reminiscent of the columns of Rome, notably Trajan's column and its scenes of the Dacian campaign[43]. The similarity to the figures on Trajan's column is not surprising; they were themselves based on both Greek and Roman statues to which Roman sculptors had access in the second century. In the first version of *The Rape of the Sabine Women*, Poussin directly referenced a Roman sculpture copied from a Greek original. This statue is the Ludovisi Gaul, used by Poussin as a reference for his figures, notably the couple on the front left of the canvas[44]. Poussin is known for drawing inspiration from a multitude of other works from antiquity, and it is known that he

[42] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 201.
[43] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 200.
[44] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 200.

examined the proportions and pose of antique canons such as the *Torso Belvedere* and the *Laocoon*, among many others. [45] Pierre Rosenberg writes that this inspiration from antiquity, notably from Hellenistic Greece, was complemented by drawing upon celebrated works by Poussin's contemporaries, such as the statue *Rape of the Sabine Women* by Giambologna in the Loggia dei Lanzi in Florence[46]. While the similarities are slightly less noticeable in the second version of the painting, the couple on the left side, where a man grabs a woman who extends her arm in the air, still contains visual parallels with the previously discussed statues. The expression of the figures, not only in their facial motions but gestural actions, is in direct dialogue with the antique models that Poussin examined carefully before painting his canvases. Poussin's use of expression lies not only in emotion conveyed facially but also through gesture and positioning of the body. Expression is a vernacular that unifies the different aspects of the painted figure into a rhetorical dialogue with the viewer; what can the viewer learn from looking closely at the figures. Poussin's attention to antiquity resulted in the conviction that he could distinguish between Greek from Roman works; he considered them different even though during the 17th-century little effort was made to differentiate between cultures in antique art[47]. Poussin combined the composition of Hellenistic sculpture in a contemporary composition provided by sculptors of Poussin's time to create his figures, both ancient and modern in their undertaking.

Prior to discussing why Poussin decided to unify both ancient and modern traditions, it is important to carefully examine the action of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* and understand why Greek figures matter. Similarly, regarding *Et in Arcadia Ego*, discussed earlier, the viewer notices two kinds of figures. The eyes are first drawn to the violent expression of the

[45] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the love of painting* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, March 27, 2000) 33.
[46] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 113.
[47] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 31.

men abducting the Sabine women, who forcefully throw their arms upward, their faces contorted by terror and confusion. A man on horseback violently grips to the fabric of a woman's skirt, while in the foreground, a man clothed in yellow fabric looks back at a woman being seized, possibly a wife or daughter. The corporeal expression of the figures has a grandiose feeling of theatricality; the figures are arranged as if on a stage, with the action taking place directly in front of the viewer. The figures tear the scene into multiple directions, directing the viewer's gaze purposefully to the individual actions of the groups of men and women as the narrative unfolds. The presence of Romulus unifies the canvas and his entourage, who act as the second main type of figure Poussin identifies with people, these being figures that are calm and collected. Their corporeal expressions are calm, the only action contained in Romulus' lifted arm, permitting such disarray to occur. Their facial expressions hide their emotions as they contemplate the scene. In the silent hand raised, Romulus commands the canvas and unifies the action in the forum under him. In his statuesque gesture, reminiscent of Roman statues of generals such as the Augustus of Prima Porta, Romulus acts as the unifying voice that radiates order in the scene's chaos. Poussin was interested in illustrating different forms of facial expressions and how they display the characters of his figures. Most figures, however, display majoritarily a Greek mode rather than a Roman statuary mode. Duquesnoy, an artist friend of Poussin, described the Greek mode as having four overall qualities, "grandeur," "nobility," "majesty," and "leggiadria", better described as grace[48].

Lebrun, and later Boselli, would say that Poussin and Duquesnoy considered the Greek mode superior to the Roman mode because Greek statues had fewer "contours.[49]" The difference in the treatment of contour, and by extension the effect of the figure on space and

[48] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 40.
[49] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 43.

the viewer, is the main reason for distinguishing the Greek mode from the Roman statuary mode, according to Duquesnoy and Poussin. That is to say that sharp outlines and chiaroscuro were avoided and gave way to the roundness of the human body. By providing the body fewer contours, the figures gained corpus, their mass took advantage of their own space and became more grandiose in their presence on a canvas. The Sabines take full advantage of the Greek contours; they take over the forum's space, their roundness suggesting that they could be viewed from all sides. Romulus, in contrast, is Roman in his mode; he stands much sharper in his contour. Romulus is contrasted as his figure radiates stability and command, standing still in space compared to the flowing movements of the figures below him. The statuary modes are utilized to accentuate the feature of each figure, whether it be movement or stillness. The physical body became as crucial for conveying expression as the face for conveying emotion.

The artistic vernacular of Poussin and the way he goes about painting *historia* emerge from the way he emulates antiquity even while not depending upon it for his artistic *expression*. In their work, Nicolas Poussin: Friendship and the love of painting, Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper argue that Poussin was not simply a classicist that aspired towards replicating exact copies of the work of the ancient masters. Poussin was modernizing antiquity, as well as works by his contemporaries to create a new template of expression that conveys to the viewer the "enjeux" of the subject matter depicted, "Instead they saw them (great masters of the past) as exemplifying in their work a knowledge and mastery of various critical concepts of expressions, as well as different natural and artistic perfections in a distinct modern tradition.[50]" While Poussin certainly admired antiquity, as demonstrated by his attention to it, he did not aim simply to restore Greek or Latin methods of artistic expression but rather to build upon this antique tradition in creating a modern amalgamation

[50] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 11.

of artistic voices and works of art unique to him. This modernization is best exemplified by combining both modes and creating a composition of figures that went beyond classical statues. Figures are to be read as intently as any symbolism or setting in Poussin's canvas as they carry humanistic ideals of classical literature and art. Reading the figures is essential in understanding Poussin's humanistic ideals in his canvas. The painting demonstrates Poussin was able to convey Greek expression, exemplified by the Sabine Women, Roman expression, visible in Romulus' pose, as well as create a contemporary composition. Poussin created a new historia by building upon modes taken from past art history.

While we have discussed the importance of figures and their unique expressions, it is important to discuss how Poussin used the vernacular mode in his historical paintings. Shifting away from the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, the painting *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* provides a complementary understanding of the previous painting. It shares the characteristic of being a historical painting. The only difference in the *Jews Gathering Manna*

Figure 5: Nicolas Poussin, The Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert, 1637-39, oil on canvas, 149 X 200cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

in the Desert is that it is a biblical subject rather than a pagan one. The painting[51] depicts the biblical story of Manna, which occurred after the departure from Egypt when the Israelites wandered in the desert for forty years. As hunger and thirst began to set in, many Israelites lost faith. Moses reassured them that God had not abandoned them, and it was at that moment God made Manna fall from heaven, heavenly food that appeased the hunger and thirst of the weary Israelites, affirming that God had indeed not left them to their fate. The painting captures the moment when the miracle of Manna begins, and the Israelites discover that they have been saved through divine intervention. The painting was commissioned by a friend of Poussin, Paul Fréart de Chantelou,[52] an avid art collector and one of his most devoted French patrons. Chantelou also served as a go-between for Poussin and numerous other French patrons, and he was instrumental in convincing Poussin to return to France in 1640. Just as with the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, this painting would be acquired by Louis XIV, possibly with the assistance of Charles Lebrun, and entered the royal collections in 1667.[53] Like the previous painting discussed in this chapter, the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* places expression at the forefront. Unlike the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, architecture has no place here; the scene is set in a mountainous desert removed from any sign of civilization. This allows the viewer to focus solely on the expression of the figures and on what they can inform about the nature of the action transpiring. Naya Tsentourou argues that the canvas prioritizes the figures. It is just as much a canvas about human expression and emotion as it is a painting about Biblical history: "the gestures and passion of the Israelites […] are prioritized.[54]" The fact that Moses is in the background is a clear indication that while biblical history certainly matters, it is physically placed behind the figures of the Israelites. It is a conversation between

[51] Figure 5
[52] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 162.
[53] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 165.
[54] Tsentourou Naya, *"Savoury Words": Milton and the consumption of Manna* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Studies in English literature, 1500-1900, 2016, Vol.56 (1), p.171-192 [Peer Reviewed Journal]) 172.

human figures, an ideal between two types of figures represented by The Israelites and Moses, similarly to *Rape of the Sabine Women* between the Sabine and Romulus. Biblical history is told through figures; they alone can be read for the narrative to unfold. This precise focus on analysis continues the previously cited use of historical, artistic modes to create Poussin's ideal figures.

Later works support this argument by Poussin, such as *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well*, painted in 1648. Like the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert*, the painting is a historical biblical painting, yet the expression of the figures is based to a greater extent on Antiquity. Elizabeth Cropper argues that the women derive from antique vases from Egypt, Rome, and Greece.[55] Furthermore, the women take on architectural elements, such as the Maison Carrée in Lyon, based on readings from Vitruvius that compared the human body to architecture[56]. This use of antiquity was supplemented by an emulation of great painters for each figure, such as Guido Reni or Raphael;[57] Poussin continues to combine modern and ancient tenderness a decade after the *Rape of the Sabine Women* and the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert. Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well* demonstrate the continuing influence of antiquity and ancient literature in the works of Poussin. *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well* is a study not of types of figures or statuesque mode but rather a study of human proportions based on antique vases. Elizabeth Cropper suggests that Poussin based the women in the canvas on ancient types of vases, each figure imitating the vase they are holding.[58] These vases are themselves based on the literature of Vitruvius, who compared human proportions with architecture, notably columns.[59] Poussin replicated in his own style Vitruvius' idea,

[55] Elizabeth Cropper, "On Beautiful Women, Parmigianino, Petrarchismo and the Vernacular Style." *The Art Bulletin,* Vol 58, page 374-394, (1976): 380.

[56] Cropper, "On Beautiful Women", 381.
[57] Cropper, "On Beautiful Women", 379.
[58] Cropper, "On Beautiful Women", 380.
[59] Cropper, "On Beautiful Women", 381.

basing his canvas as much on physical objects that are vases than on ancient literature. This feat demonstrates Poussin's attraction to antiquity, to experiment with painting figures on other kinds of inanimate objects, not just statues. It is an integral part of understanding the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert,* which, while Biblical, retains the influence of Pagan expression and philosophy.

While it is clear that the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* is centrally engaged with Greek Antiquity, it remains to be understood how Poussin developed the historia for a specifically biblical subject. Poussin provided some information on how to appreciate his work, famously writing in one of his letters to Chantelou that one could appreciate the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* if they knew how to read it,

> J'ai trouvé une certaines distribution pour le tableau de M. de Chantelou, et certaines attitudes naturelles, qui font voir dans le peuple juif la misère et la faim ou il étoit réduit, et aussi la joye et l'allégresse ou il se trouve ; l'admiration dont il est touché, le respect et la révérence qu'il a pour son législateur, avec un mélange de femmes, d'enfants et d'hommes d'age et de tempéramens différents ; choses comme je crois, qui ne déplairont pas à ceux qui les sauront bien lire.[60]

While short in content, this letter provides a vital clue as to how Poussin defined his own artistic vernacular as one that should be read, "sauront bien lire." Poussin informs Chantelou that the canvas should be read, paying careful attention to the figures, most notably their expression. Marc Fumaroli suggests a similar theory, comparing the expression of the figures to deciphering hieroglyphics, "la grande Hieroglyphic des gestes.[61]" To decipher his language, the figures all need to be "translated" if one is to understand how Poussin presents his historia to the viewer. The connection of painting to literary sources is a theme Poussin has alluded to even in his earlier paintings. Poussin's poetic period was a dialogue between

[60] Nicolas Poussin, *Nicolas Poussin, Lettres et Propos sur L'Art* (Hermann, Paris, 2014) 37.
[61] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 179.

Figure 6: Detail of the Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert, Moses raising his arm

painting and the poetic texts he referenced. This example represents a continuation and evolution of this practice. The link between literature, especially poetry, and art was codified in the work by the Latin poet Horace called *Ars Poetica.* The specific term used by Horace was "ut pictura poesis,[62]" which translates to "as is painting so is poetry." It represented an attempt by Horace to put poetry and painting on equal footing: both demands to be read attentively. *Ut pictura poesis* was reinvented and used by Poussin in his work, conditioning the viewer to look at his canvas differently than they would at another artist. Poussin elevates art as an artistic current that requires more than simple visual observation; it also requires an understanding of poetry which he considered to be on the same level as the visual arts. Poetry is present in Poussin's historical painting of Moses in the desert, as much as it was in his early career.

Following the context Poussin provided, it remains for the painting to be carefully examined. The *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* is a canvas that is just as interested in historical narration as it is a painting about human nature and emotion; in this respect, it is similar to the *Rape of the Sabine Women*[63]. The painting features Poussin's convention of distinguishing between two types of figures, the introspective, calm, and collected *expression* and the *expression* of unbridled passion and unrestrained emotion. Moses and the figures

[62] Jutta Gisela Sperling, Medieval and Renaissance Lactations, Image, Rhetoric, Practices (Taylor and Francis Books, London, 2013) 176.
[63] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 202.

directly surrounding him illustrate the paradigm of the calm, introspective figure in the painting. Moses is at the center of the painting, the focal point around which the entire action in the canvas revolves. Just as Romulus was the "*honnête* homme," Moses holds his passions in check[64]; his only reaction to the miracle is to point heavenward,[65] reassuring the Israelites that God has not abandoned them. On a compositional note, the pose of Moses is a direct reference to Plato in the *School of Athens* by Raphael[66]; Raphael's Plato, too, focuses on divine matters, though as a philosopher. The calmness of Moses is absolute as if God himself were talking through him, informing the Israelites of the fall of manna and of salvation to come. His expression is reminiscent of Greek statuary, standing firm and collected in his stance. However, unlike Romulus, Moses is much more central to the composition, and the viewer quickly notices that the scene revolves around him. Despite Moses not being in the foreground, the attentive viewer can instantly recognize him by reading his calm expression and noting that he is the only figure pointing toward God, connecting the scene of despair and deliverance to the divine.

This brings the viewer to the other figures, who express uncontrolled emotions. These figures are the Israelites surrounding Moses, especially those arranged across the foreground. Most striking is the group on the left side, the woman in blue giving her breast for suckling in an act of charity, and the starving woman and child at her feet. This group, in particular, highlights the horror and pain of starvation and despair, as they are unaware of the arrival of manna from heaven. Inversely, the figures on the right side of the canvas show their sudden relief at witnessing the fall of manna; they fall to their knees to collect it while the woman in a yellow dress in the foreground turns to face the figures on the left side of the canvas, responding to their despair by informing them of the miracle. Poussin manages to capture the

[64] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 203.
[65] Figure 6
[66] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 166.

duality of the scene, to encapsulate both the expression of despair and horror and the expression of relief and salvation. While both of these figure types reveal their passions, they exemplify very different approaches to human expression. The two expressions captured demonstrate a new approach created by Poussin regarding the historia, including expression as a central method for understanding the biblical narrative. It is a manner of painting Poussin had not attempted before. The *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert* blurs the line between the beginning and end of the biblical story, showing the state of human emotion throughout. The human emotion is demonstrated by the pain and suffering of hunger at the start of the biblical story to the relief and bliss shown by the figures as God saves them at the end of the narrative. The use of multiple expressions raises a final question about Poussin's transformation of the historical paintings: is Poussin depicting various vignettes of individual stories in a single canvas or is Poussin representing a cohesive biblical passage meant that must be read as a unified canvas?

Indeed, multiple scholars have debated whether Poussin historia depicts a single moment of the story or combines elements from various temporal instants, beginning to end, in numerous smaller scenes. Jacques Thullier argues that the painting represents multiple vignettes of the same story, and that Poussin did not depict a precise moment but rather multiple moments, aggregating them[67]. Thullier believes that the central aim of the canvas was to explore human emotion, more so than telling a biblical story. While Poussin was certainly interested in expression and human emotion, the historical narrative was also important to him. The previously discussed second version of the *Rape of the Sabine Women* illustrates Poussin's attention to narrative specificity by placing the scene in an accurate cityscape. The same is true of the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert*. Poussin showed a

[67] Francis H. Dowley, "Thoughts on Poussin, Time, and Narrative: The Israelites Gathering Manna in the Desert." *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art*, 1997, Vol 25, N. 4 (1997), pp. 329-348: 332.

wide array of emotions; it does not contradict the unity of time and place in the painting itself. The wide array of emotions represents a single moment in time rather than isolated moments within the same story. Poussin was acutely aware of the importance of composition, and by placing the manna on the right side of the painting, he created compositional unity. The figures on the left are placed before the arrival of manna as it moves across the painting from right to left, signifying a united moment rather than an isolated one. This is because the figures gradually realize that that manna is progressively falling. The figures that have not realized manna is falling have to be read in tandem with those who do. This is emphasized by the figures pointing and reaching out to one another, such as with the older man on the left side raising his arms in surprise and joy at the sight of the approaching manna, thanking God by opening his arms to him. This theory is supported by other scholars as well; going back to the woman sharing her breast on the left side of the canvas, Francis Dowley notes the contradictory action of the woman who shouldn't be sharing her milk if at the same time manna falls from heaven, "But clearly if the manna is falling all around her while she is nursing, then her action is simultaneous with and not prior to the fall of the manna.[68]" Despite being an allegory of charity, highlighting the expression of despair and hunger, sharing the woman's breast also simulates the relief provided to the starving Israelites by the manna falling from the heavens; her charity is comparable to the one of God. Like the women in *Et in Arcadia Ego*, the woman is both represented as part of the scene while also being detached from the action. The figure invites the viewer to reflect on the Israelites' suffering and the eventual salvation that God brings to them. The viewer must carefully read the figure's expression individually and in relation to the unfolding events. The charitable woman contrasts with the rest of the scene[69], accentuating the resolute composure of Moses and, therefore, the faith in salvation from God. This contrast could not be achieved if the individual

[68] Dowley, "Thoughts on Poussin", 334.
[69] Dowley, "Thoughts on Poussin", 340.

elements were to be read individually rather than as a united whole. Furthermore, the figures in the canvas are all united by a silent "Verb" identified by Marc Fumaroli as represented by the rock archway from which light radiates as if it were the voice of God speaking to the Israelites[70]. Fumaroli suggests that the silent divine voice is stronger than the voice, or action, of Moses and, by extension, Romulus. Yet the figure of Moses only serves to amplify the divine by directly insinuating God to the viewer. The figures, just as in the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, are united by the central figure of Moses, the de facto voice of God amongst them. Moses is the only figure who actively communicates and refers directly to God through his gesture of pointing heavenward, which signifies the role of the divine in the narrative unfolding. The manna is merely an extension of the power of God present in the scene, invisible but for the figures' expressions. The figures in the foreground demonstrate the action of God and are meant to be understood in tandem with Moses; it is through specifically Moses that the voice of God manifests. Through Moses' motion, the manna falls from the sky, causing the Israelites to recognize the divine intervention made visible to them. Through both types of figures, the ones in the foreground and Moses, the invisible becomes visible to the admirers of the painting. It is through this combination of philosophy and theology that Fumaroli argues Poussin captured the values of the French aristocracy, notably Chantelou, the patron of the work, "l'idéal d'une aristocratie […] à la fois humaniste et chrétienne[71]." Poussin created a new template in his vernacular, requiring the intent reading of the figures in his canvases. This new enthesis on human figures would come to be greatly appreciated by Poussin's French patrons.

This chapter examined the years leading to Poussin's departure to France in 1640 and discussed how humanistic movements further developed in Poussin's career over time. This

[70] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 171.
[71] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, le sentiment des images au XVIIe siècle,* 173.

period of painting marks the point when Poussin ceased to be considered sui generis but rather was admired for being the best among his fellow citizens for his unique artistic language and why he would be called upon to return and work for the crown. Poussin had by no means abandoned his previous admiration of poetry; it was merely less prominent due to the fact that Poussin developed new interests in antiquarianism and philosophy that he explored alongside poetry. The *Rape of the Sabine Women* and the *Jews Gathering Manna* provided a pertinent contrast as both are history paintings but represent very different subjects, one pagan, the other biblical—in other words, a secular subject and theological subject. While the subjects of the two paintings are very different, one being biblical the other being a representation of classical antiquity, their themes are conveyed in a similar technique. Both paintings utilized expression drawn from antiquity and contemporary composition and stylistic techniques. Poussin went so far as to distinguish between Greek and Latin forms of expression, referencing both in his work while also incorporating literary references. He includes the use of Petronius, Vitruvius, and Livy's work, including Horace, among the few classical literary sources. These texts differ widely, from architectural treaties to poetics and ancient history, yet they represent an interest in Poussin in including ancient literary sources in his canvases. Yet the most important connection the two paintings share is the study of human emotion and expression, a common emphasis whether it be a pagan or Christian canvas. There is no doubt that *Jews Gathering Manna* was a theological work, as God is of central importance in the picture. Yet, the philosophical aspect of the painting is intertwined in the work, blurring the boundary of the decorum of historical painting. History is represented in the *Jews Gathering Manna* as Poussin's accuracy in representing an accurate rendition of the biblical passage, treated to the same regard as classical history yet infused with the divine. The two paintings share their commonality in how Poussin conveys their narrative; they share the same artistic vernacular serving two different purposes, one recounting classical pagan history the other

biblical history. Pagan historical paintings by Poussin only have one main difference with biblical historical panting is the lack of theological ideas.

Rome was the ideal environment for these humanistic movements to blend, from antiquity to poetry; the city gave Poussin a cultural foundation admired across Europe. Because of the adoption of classical antiquity in painting and literature, Poussin became one of the most sought-after painters by French elites. Poussin's work represented what the Kingdom of France wanted to become, a state with ties to the great Antique past of Rome. The artistic language of Poussin embodied the artistic accomplishments of Rome the humanistic movements in poetry and literature. It directly linked France and classical antiquity, the centerpiece of the emerging centralized French monarchy. It is for this reason that only a year after the *Jews Gathering Manna in the Desert*, Poussin was invited to reside in France and paint the main gallery of the Louvre. The arrival of Poussin in France and his relation to the French court life provides more information on Poussin's artistic language, one that interacted with the politic of his time. The relationship between France and Poussin is the subject of the next chapter.

Chapter 3
Rome and Paris

The late 1640s were a turbulent time in French history. In 1648 the revolt of the Fronde began, and for five years, from 1648 to 1653, the French nobles would periodically revolt against the crown's authority until they were ultimately defeated. While the Fronde considerably shook French elites, it was a localized problem that did not spread internationally. Despite this, Nicolas Poussin's paintings have a dramatic shift in their mode

and meaning around the same time as the Fronde. This stylistic change, illustrated by his painting *The Judgment of Salomon* (1649) and his *Self-Portrait* (1650), is the work of an artist who was still actively taking part despite being detached from French life by living in Rome the cultural and political life of France. This chapter aims at answering the question of, how, if any, did French politics influence the art produced by Poussin. Was his work made in dialogue with political shifts occurring abroad, or were the stylistic changes of Poussin in the late 1640s purely a coincidence? This chapter's final question is why Poussin, who considered himself a Roman painter, was fundamental in creating the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture. Bizarrely, Nicolas Poussin resided in Rome and was praised by Charles LeBrun as the foundation of the modern French academic painting, despite the fact Poussin never wished to work in France. Before examining these questions, it is first essential to understand Poussin's relationship with France. Poussin best exemplifies this relationship during his journey to Paris in 1641 and his subsequent departure and return to Rome, never returning to his native land.

In December 1640, Nicolas Poussin was visited by his friend and patron, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, who was sent to Rome by Sublet de Noyers to bring back French artists in Rome to Paris[72]. The artists' return was financially supported with the collaboration of the French court of the then King Louis XIII to incentivize artists to return, particularly Poussin who had been asked, with no success, previously to return to France. Rosenberg notes that artists such as Poussin were offered significant benefits and prestige by the court, including commissions, housing, and payment for their return, "faisant l'objets d'offres pressantes de la part de la cour de France.[73]" However, while Rosenberg notes the appealing benefits an artist had, the personal letters of Poussin reveal that politics may also have had an essential role in

[72] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 31.
[73] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 31.

the decision process. Sublet de Noyers sent a letter to Poussin before his departure in 1640 which includes a striking passage noticed by Jacques Thullier which mentions that the kings (and by extension the French court) have long hands and that their influence can be felt even in Rome, "que les Roys ont les mains bien longues.[74]" While this may be a small detail, it provides evidence that even though Poussin had delayed his return to France and had, for the most part, refrained from partaking in French court life, The King had caught up with even Poussin living abroad. Whether due to menaces, benefits that waited for him in France, or a combination of the two, Poussin eventually agreed to his installation in France, convinced by Chantelou and Noyers.

Poussin was treated to luxury in Paris, being given by Cardinal Richelieu a large household in the Tuileries Garden,[75] a prime and spacious location next door to the Tuileries Palace and the Chateau du Louvre. This was complemented by a salary of 1000 écus[76], a sizable remuneration even for an artist of the court. Poussin was flooded with commissions during this period, both for the court and private patrons. Some of the grandeur commissions include the creation of tapestries for the *Gobelins* workshop and the important commission by Cardinal Richelieu and the King to paint the Grande Galerie of the Louvre.[77] While the designs for the tapestries would be completed, the Grande Galerie of the Louvre would famously never be completed by Nicolas Poussin, leaving only scattered sketches and preparatory drawings from the royal commission. Rosenberg mentions that Poussin was the wrong fit for the "politique artistique de Louis XIII[78]." In other words, Poussin was not suited for political discourse in his artistic language. While there is truth in the fact Poussin was not suited for royal politics, that is not to say that Poussin's art was devoid of political

[74] Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres et Propos sur L'Art*, 14.
[75] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 33.
[76] Lévêque, *La vie et l'œuvre de Nicolas Poussin,* 154.
[77] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 34.
[78] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 35.

commentary. On the contrary, the stay in Paris was significant for the humanist painter. Poussin was confronted with a new humanistic discourse, the discourse of nation-making. Poussin was thrust into a changing French government with increasingly more powerful kings that controlled the state. While Poussin was discovering the importance of court life in elite French lives, the humanistic ideas in Poussin's painting were precisely what the French royalty and elites needed to build a new modern state that could rival Rome. The notion of French nation-building and its relation to Poussin will be examined further in the chapter.

While the stay of Poussin in Paris was brief, leaving in 1642 while the court was away from the capital, its significance cannot be understated as it heavily involved Poussin with the court life of France. Where Poussin failed as a court painter, he succeeded in the number of connections and commissions he earned from the Parisian elite. Poussin acquired many connections to French patrons and further augmented his renown. In fact, upon his return in Rome, the majority of commissions and patrons were no longer majoritarily Italians, as was the case when he arrived in Rome in the 1620s with the poetic circle of Cassiano dal Pozzo. Part of the reason for Nicolas Poussin's success in Paris was due to his connection to the intellectual life of Rome. Jean-Jacques Lévêque notes that for the Parisians, Poussin's departure was a tragic loss for his French patrons living in the capital, "Son expérience romaine n'échappe pas à Paris. Il y est célèbre. Dans l'entourage de Richelieu on évoque son nom, regrettant qu'il échappe à l'action du Cardinal.[79]" Yet despite this setback, Poussin created a new social circle of French humanists and intellectuals that was often opposed to the state's power. This group labeled by Rosenberg as belonging to a "République des lettres"[80] would criticize the royal authority and whose members would be the most important patrons of Poussin for the next decade. Some of these patrons in this category would be Sublet de

[79] Lévêque, *La vie et l'œuvre de Nicolas Poussin,* 146.
[80] Rosenberg and Temperini, *« Je n'ai rien négligé »,* 38.

Figure 7: Nicolas Poussin, The Judgment of Salomon, 1649, oil on canvas, 101 X 150cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

Noyers and Jean Pointel. This is especially the case for Sublet de Noyers, who was disgraced and lost favor with the court when Cardinal Mazarin became regent after the death of Louis XIII in 1643. Gradually, many of the French intellectuals Poussin had as patrons after his departure from Paris were pushed out by Mazarin until the end of the Fronde when Mazarin permanently quelled any revolts and silenced the discontentment. It is within this new social-economic model we must consider Poussin when he painted *The Judgment of Salomon* in 1648, at the height of the Fronde revolt. While Poussin was physically distanced from France in Rome, mentally, he had never been more connected to the movements happening abroad. In the paintings by Poussin of that period, he begins to include in his artistic vernacular a conversation on politics and reflects the troubled times he was experiencing from abroad. This is manifested both in stylistic changes and underlying themes that his paintings of that era have. To illustrate this change, an excellent place to begin is by analyzing The Judgment of Salomon to visualize the shift in Poussin's artistic language.

Nicolas Poussin painted the Judgment of Salomon in 1649 for a private French patron called Jean Pointel, who lived in Lyon.[81] Jean Pointel was a close friend of Poussin and a faithful patron of his. The story of the painting involves king Salomon, son of King David, settling a dispute between two mothers over whom the living child belongs to. Salomon suggests cutting the child in half, seen here on the canvas held by the soldier, to which, in response, the woman on the left tells Salomon to let the other women keep the child. In contrast, the woman on the right suggests going ahead with Salomon's suggestion. Salomon recognizes the actual mother and decides she can keep the child as only the real mother would sacrifice having him for his safety[82]. This is a perfect archetype of the "just ruler," the wise king who rules justly through reason rather than letting emotion cloud judgment.

At first glance, the work features a language that Poussin's patrons would have recognized. The work has certain elements that are similar to the previous paintings by Poussin. For instance, in *The Jews Gathering Mana in the Desert,* the events of the biblical story are chronological, meant to be understood by reading the canvas from right to left as the manna begins to fall; in the *Judgment of Salomon,* there is similarly a subtle chronological connection. The painting contains a multitude of "frames" of the story woven together through the careful positioning of the figures, a technique Poussin had already used in his previous canvases. The viewer can observe as the soldier raises his sword after the suggestion of Salomon, the rightful mother begging for the child's life, and the false mother agreeing to cut the child. These "frames" can be read as a narrative; the reader can follow the pointing of the wrongful mother to the soldier, which causes the rightful mother to exclaim with her hand outstretched, guiding the viewer's eye to Salomon in the center. Yet, as much as certain

[81] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 210.
[82] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 213.

elements are similar, the painting demonstrates a radical shift in Poussin's artistic vernacular. Todd Olson mentions that the work loses the in-depth perspective of some of Poussin's earlier works such as the *Rape of the Sabine Women*, comparing The Judgment of Salomon with style reminiscent of the ancient Roman shallow plane observed in their relief sculpture, "The drawing adopts the visual grammar of ancient Roman reliefs, exploiting temporal discontinuities and spatial juxtaposition.[83]" While the temporal discontinuities mentioned by Olson are somewhat rectified, as is the case in the *Jews Gathering Manna* by Poussin's structuring of the painting and the actions of the figures, the frieze aspect is interesting as the canvas appears more severe than the previous work of Poussin. Olson labels this severity as "brittle[84],", especially in the figures that Poussin painted. Indeed, it is far from the poetic grace that Poussin infused his paintings in his earlier career, such as was the case with *The Inspiration of the Poet*; the figures tend much more to the statuesque. Yet, their *affetti*, or facial expressions, has never been so bold. Where the bodies lose in grace and movement, they make up for in this new vernacular Poussin developed. One such example is the *affetti* conveyed by the wrongful mother whose face and positioning tells the viewer all there is to know about her, of her horrible deeds in killing one of her own child hanging limply in her arms. Aside from *affetti*, Poussin continues to engage and develop the expression of his figure. This is most noticeable in Poussin's careful attention in the expression of king Salomon; he sits resolute, his face devoid of any extreme emotion, simply looking at the rightful mother and directing orders with his hands, the only part of his body that moves. He stands undivided in the middle of the canvas, unifying the divided scene, a rock in the tumultuous squabble of the courtroom. The expression of Salomon harkens back to Poussin's two-figure type, with Salomon being depicted as an "*honnête* homme,"[85] comparable to

[83] Olson, *Poussin and France, 157.*
[84] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 157.
[85] Costello, "The Rape of the Sabine Women", 203.

Moses in *The Jews Gathering Mana in the Desert*. Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper reinforce this idea of the expression conveying the theme of the painting by taking a similar approach while examining *The Jews Gathering Mana in the Desert*, "The pathos of their individual expression is expressed in their bodies, conceived and defined by the perfected and abstract norms,"[86] in other words, the expression of figures such as Salomon lay in a careful reading of their face and body. Furthermore, the figures themselves reveal as much information to the viewer as the scene as a whole conveys. Salomon, the rightful mother and the wrongful mother in a vacuum would suffice for Poussin's artistic vernacular to shine through, "Expression is rather, […] a means by which the painter is able to predetermine the disposition of the beholder, to establish a primary response that is anterior to the secondary act of reading the actual subject of a work of art."[87]

The figures in *The Judgment of Salomon* are a continuation of the study of classical statues and expressions that Poussin had developed earlier in the decade prior. Yet as previously mentioned, it lacks the gentle touch of poetry and literary references that Poussin imbued in his previous paintings. The new relation can explain this seeming abandonment of poetry from Poussin's artistic canon Poussin had formed with his patrons.

The shift from poetic imagery to the classicism observed in *The Judgment of Salomon* can not only be explained by a natural progression of Poussin's vernacular but also a shift in the humanist interest of his patrons. Indeed, *The Judgment of Salomon* was commissioned by the French patron Jean Pointel living in a very tumultuous Lyon. As much as the nationality of Poussin's patron changed, so did their interest in Poussin's paintings, reflecting the humanistic interest of French elites during the Fronde. It was no secret that much of the French elite fought back against the increasingly centralized royal court, particularly Cardinal

[86] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 47.
[87] Charles Dempsey and Elizabeth Cropper, *Friendship and the love of painting,* 47.

de Mazarin[88]. Todd Olson mentions specifically that Poussin himself and a number of his patrons were already unfavorable, even before the Fronde, towards Mazarin, notably his art collecting, "Antagonism toward Mazarin's collection practices was voiced in the first years of the 1640S by Poussin and the circle of Sublet de Noyers."[89] The harsh judgment certain French patrons carried towards Mazarin and the general weariness Poussin experienced towards him suggest that *The Judgment of Salomon* may contain a political commentary on the political figures of the period. Salomon, in particular, is a figure traditionally associated with being a wise ruler whose decision-making, as is shown in the judgment itself, is impartial and based on reason. It is difficult not to believe that Poussin, a cultured and lettered man whose patrons were almost exclusively French, was not aware of the Fronde and of Mazarin, who was thought to be an incompetent regent in contrast to the wise and just Salomon.

In addition to this apparent thematic connection, the political association of Poussin's art is not merely a coincidence in the ironic choice of subject matter considering the time period; there is also a literary connection between *The Judgment of Salomon* and the Fronde. Nicolas Poussin extensively studied the work of the Roman historian Tacitus and made several references from Tacitus' writings in his canvases. The writings of Tacitus were notably included as a source for the representation of *The Death of Germanicus*. According to Todd Olson, "Tacitus was one of Poussin's sources for his own representation of the consequences of political corruption in *The Death of Germanicus*."[90] As Tacitus was known for his critique of political regimes of his times, it was only natural that the Frondist based their critique on Mazarin and his court through the means of classical humanism. The Frondist used Tacitus as a classical rebuttal of the political regime in France.[91] This attribution of

[88] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 101.
[89] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 128.
[90] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 106.
[91] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 106.

Tacitus with the Fronde would not have been lost on Poussin, who, despite distancing himself from the Italian poetics, was acutely aware of classical texts that were part of the humanist discourse of the French Frondist. This association between politics and art goes even further, considering that the notable Frondist Achille de Harlay III acquired the Judgment of Salomon after it was sold from Jean Pointel's collection.[92] Achille de Harlay III, and notably his father, were made pamphlets imitating Tacitus' writing style during the Fronde. The association between politics, art, and classical literature would not have been lost on them and actively played a role in their appreciation of Poussin's work.

However, not all scholars agree over the use of political discourse as part of Poussin's artistic vernacular. Pierre Rosenberg notably refuted the notion that Poussin's *Judgment of Salomon* has little to no connection with the Fronde, "Olson, à la suite de Warnke, a noté, sans trop convaincre, les allusions aux événements politiques de l'époque, àla Fronde qui préoccupait Poussin."[93] It is too simple to dismiss the political aspect of Poussin's work; as the previous chapter has shown, Poussin was involved in many social circles of Italy and France. Poussin was not afraid to paint social themes such as the advancement and encouragement of poetic language in papal Rome that Poussin used extensively in the 1620s in Marino's poetic circle. Thus, there is no indication that Poussin would expressly exclude French politics, especially during the turbulent Fronde, in his paintings. While the Fronde was not the only subject of interest in his *Judgment of Salomon*, the canvas was undoubtedly subjected to political scrutiny. Despite the fact that Poussin never publicly denounced or rejected Mazarin, it is unlikely that Poussin would not have understood the importance of his work among the humanist discourse of the Frondist. The association between his art and politics is hardly coincidental. Poussin continued to apply *expression* and the use of antiquity

[92] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 212.
[93] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 214.

as a foundation in his canvases. Yet, it also included politics which made a dramatic appearance in Poussin's art only after the Frondist revolts began. This fact is only reinforced by the knowledge that Poussin was already critical of the French court after his visit in 1640. Cardinal Mazarin's power struggle and subsequent removal from office for many of Poussin's closest patrons strained Poussin's relationship with French court life. For the humanist painter, engaging with a political rule such as in the *Judgment of Salomon* using classical reflection on the examples of ruling was a natural progression in Poussin's vernacular. The painting was, in effect, a vernacular language that the Frondist would have understood. The Frondist could make these political connections between the canvas and current events without Poussin's politics overshadowing his attention to classism and exploration of expression and affetti. The painting underscores the importance that the French humanist and elites attributed to Poussin; despite drawing in several Frondist patrons, Poussin's work remained highly esteemed by the French court and Cardinal Mazarin, who also had pieces by Poussin in his collection. This leads to the final important question regarding Poussin's work, why was Poussin's art so popular and in demand by French elites on all sides of the political spectrum?

We must turn to how Nicolas Poussin decided to portray himself to answer this question. The *Self-Portrait* by Poussin made finished in 1650 as a gift to Paul Fréart de Chantelou.[94] The portrait was a personal work by Poussin, confirmed due to the fact that Louis XIV refused twice to receive it in his collection.[95] This is not surprising as the canvas (figure 8) is very different from the glorious settings of Poussin, forgoing biblical and classical scenes in favor of a personal representation of Poussin as an artist. This version of the self-portrait is very different from the one currently in Berlin commissioned by Jean Pointel the year prior, a testament to the canvas's intimate and personalized discussion

[94] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 248.
[95] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 248.

Figure 8: Nicolas Poussin, Self-Portrait, 1650, oil on canvas, 98 X 139cm (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

between Poussin and Chantelou. A detail that points to the personal quality of this painting is the figure that can be just made out in the background left of the canvas; it is the representation of a woman wearing a crown with a third eye being received by a pair of open arms. While there is no certainty to the women's identity, most scholars, including Pierre Rosenberg, agree that the figure is a representation of art.[96] According to Danial Arasse and Daniel Posner, the outstretched arms could symbolize friendship in painting or of receiving painting with open arms.[97] This interpretation of friendship receiving painting with open arm is essential as it collaborates the possibility that the crown the figure of painting wears represents clairvoyance, attributed by the third eye in the middle of it. Clairvoyance goes hand in hand with the humanistic ideals of Poussin, who considered his close patrons and friends, such as Chantelou, as being wise men, of holding clairvoyance to interpret or "read" his canvases properly. Painting cannot exist without having a properly trained eye to appreciate what is painted on the canvas. The inclusion of the figure of painting is deliberate; it was a detail that Poussin knew Chantelou would analyze carefully. Poussin mentioned in his letters the attention and time he took to

[96] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 248.
[97] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 252.

create the work going as far as telling Chantelou in his writings that the copy sent to him was the most accurate representation of who Nicolas Poussin considered himself.

> "Monsieur Pointel aura celui que je lui ai promis en même temps, duquel vous n'aurez point de jalousie, car j'ai observé la promesse que je vous ai faite, ayant choisi le meilleur et le plus ressemblant pour vous : vous verrez la différence vous-même. »[98]

Considering this letter and knowing that the painting is a testament to Poussin's artistic identity, there is a further detail that requires attention. The auto portrait comes with a Latin inscription that translated identifies the portrait of Nicolas Poussin, a Roman painter.[99] The Roman connection goes. Further, Poussin utilizes the classical mode, borrowing the turned head from classical Roman statuary portraits.[100] Poussin adopts classical Roman imagery to convey the artist's self-attributed Roman identity among his French counterparts. Nicolas Poussin displays himself as what he always considered himself; a Roman painter detached from the political turmoil of France. This is not surprising considering that by 1650 Nicolas Poussin had been living in Rome for almost thirty years and that his only return in France had ended bitterly. The distinction between French and Roman painter that Poussin worked to establish is partly the reason for his success. Poussin could provide his French patrons, a closed elite group of friends, with a humanistic vernacular that only Rome could provide and eventually would be desired not just by his patrons but by other French elites and the royal court of Mazarin.

Poussin's appreciation was, by 1650, much larger than the artist's close group of friends. Nicolas Poussin had started to become much more than a great French artist, instead of becoming the defining French artist on which the newly formed Académie would be based

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[98] Nicolas Poussin, *Lettres*, 156.
[99] Figure 9
[100] Rosenberg, *Nicolas Poussin, Les tableaux du Louvre,* 252.

on. The royal ambitions to have Poussin become the court's painter in 1641 under Louis XIII had never faded and transitioned into buying Poussin's work into eventually joining the collections of Mazarin and Louis XIV. While it may appear contradictory at first glance that Poussin, often critical of the court, was a model for Mazarin and later Louis XIV, it makes more sense considering his work engaged with values that Mazarin was keen to be associated with. Poussin's transition from mainly Italian to French patrons was not merely due to his visit to Paris in 1641; by the late 1640s and early 1650s, Rome had already begun its decline as the cultural center of Europe. Jacques Thullier identifies in Poussin's letters that he was aware of the decline in Rome, that there was little growth in painters or collectors of painting.[101] The French patrons of Poussin filled a gap left by the declining intellectual circle that Poussin had known. The attraction towards Poussin's work was multiple, yet one significant factor briefly discussed in the last chapter was the popularity of classical antiquity in French intellectual life. Olson notes that classical references were used in all facets of everyday life, "Classical references became part of daily political discourse, read, and overheard in cafes, delivered in Parlement or from makeshift podia on the outskirts of Paris.[102]" This fact was not lost to both the public and royal court; Poussin as a Roman painter, with the sensibility of French ideals, filled the niche in providing an artistic vernacular that referenced classical antiquity. This sentiment is echoed by Marc Fumaroli who mentions the appeal the French court had in drawing from Antiquity to legitimize its growing influence, "En adoptant et en nationalisant ce mythe inspirateur, la monarchie française liait son sort a une grande nostalgie collective qui dépassant de loin les frontières du royaume.[103]" French royalty desired to appropriate Antiquity and, by extension, appropriate Poussin's work. The humanistic vernacular of Poussin was well suited to fit the burgeoning intellectual elites

[101] Jacques Thullier, *Poussin* (Flammarion, Paris, 1994) 87.
[102] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 103.
[103] Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, 387*.

of France who were interested in the fields of literature, arts, and classical studies that only Rome could provide. In fact, Rome was often considered by the crown and the newly formed Académie to be integral in the formation of royal artists, "Colbert en 1668, rendra obligatoire le voyage et sejour a Rome pour les peintres, graveures et sculpteur du roi en créant l'Académie de France. […] C'était une évidence pour tous les humanistes que les archives de l'esprit humain était a étudier a Rome.[104]" Poussin considered himself a Roman painter contributing to his French audience appreciation as he was the most knowledgeable in Italian humanist movements. Todd Olson adds further insight into this claim, "Poussins pictorial composition made claims to inherit a culture that was integrated within the state.[105]" It is important to note the word "integrated" while Poussin did not work directly for the French royal court or directly for the Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture; his work was integrated as belonging to those institutions. Poussin's work had transcended his patrons and was repurposed into a new role of heralding the emerging cultural capital that would become Paris in the late 17th century.

Nicolas Poussin became what was desired of his canvases; for his friends and close patrons, he provided an intellectual conversation that dabbled in French politics and humanistic ideals for the Académie Poussin was a model to follow, the example of pure academic painting. As for the royal court, despite Poussin's affiliation to Rome, he served as the quintessential model of French culture that the court desired. However, it was not just Rome that made Nicolas Poussin popular with French society. Poussin had acquired the sensitivity of French culture in his trip back to Paris in 1641 and during his years as a young artist. Jacques Thuillier correctly mentions that Poussin's adolescent years were crucial in forming his artistic identity that would resonate with French audiences,[106] a fact which is

[104]Fumaroli, *L'école du silence, 399.*
[105] Olson, *Poussin and France*, 185.
[106] Thullier, *Poussin, 15.*

often overlooked in studies of Nicolas Poussin. The paradox of Poussin was that while he was a Roman painter, he never renounced his French identity, and it was hugely influential in differentiating him from Italian painters who painted for an international clientele. While Poussin was more Roman than French in his painting, he was neither entirely French nor Roman; he was an amalgamation of two cultures who frequently intermingled with each other, as demonstrated in Poussin's paintings.

To close this chapter, it is essential to understand that Poussin was an artist of paradox, who painted for a select few yet became the voice of a country, an artist whose artistic vernacular engaged with politics of his time yet was sought after by those he was critical of. Most importantly, Nicolas Poussin was not a singular Roman or French artist; he was a combination of both and could not have been as impactful of a painter were it not for his interactions with both humanistic circles from the two countries. As Thullier concludes on this very paradox, for those who study Poussin, he cannot be placed under the banner of a singular country, "Acceptons ce double enracinement: le refuser ou même le négliger, c'est mutiler l'artiste et mutiler la peinture de deux pays.[107]" The same is true of Poussin's vernacular; it is a combination of humanist ideas rather than a singular humanistic mode.

Conclusion

Nicolas Poussin's artistic vernacular is one of humanism. Poussin was an artist involved with much more than painting; he was an antiquarian, a poet, and a painter who engaged in politics and literature. Throughout his career, Poussin's vernacular did not stay the same, it was fictile and changed as Poussin's interest matured. Poussin's vernacular is a combination of humanistic mode that his patrons recognized in his works; it spoke to all who

[107] Thullier, *Poussin, 16.*

surrounded him. It began with poetry but matured to include a vast repertoire of historical references for his history paintings and later in his career engaged with the politics of his time. Poussin's *Self-Portrait* is an intimate conversation between Chantelou and himself, one that was complemented in letters exchanged between the two friends. This proximity to those for whom he worked made Poussin renowned; he spoke to his patrons through his painting through humanistic movements that they were attentive too. Through this proximity, Poussin became a paradox, for he who spoke to so few became a voice for a young country. Poussin became a symbol for French art, the royal court appropriating his work on a state level despite his previous grievances. In essence, Nicolas Poussin is not a French or Italian artist, he is a combination of the voices of humanism that transcended national barriers, his art benefiting from Roman and Parisian influences he acquired over time.

Despite examining Poussin's career from his arrival until the 1650s, there is much further research that can be done on his subject. There is a reason why Poussin to this day is still examined and crossed-referenced; his artistic vernacular is extensive. For example, what were the humanistic influences in Poussin's famous landscape paintings, and how do they fit with the rest of his work? How did Poussin view his art outside of the medium of painting and in other mediums, such as during his production of designs for a series of tapestries for the Gobelins workshop? While Poussin significantly slowed his production of paintings in his later years, his final painting in the 1660s could be valuable to analyze. They represent the culmination of his career. These are just a sample of more areas that can be studied and added to the growing list of humanist movements Poussin potentially engaged with. It is clear that Nicolas Poussin should not simply be understood and called a philosopher-painter, a poet-painter, a classicism-painter, or an academic painter; Poussin encapsulated all of these titles. Perhaps, a better-suited title would be Nicolas Poussin, a humanist painter.

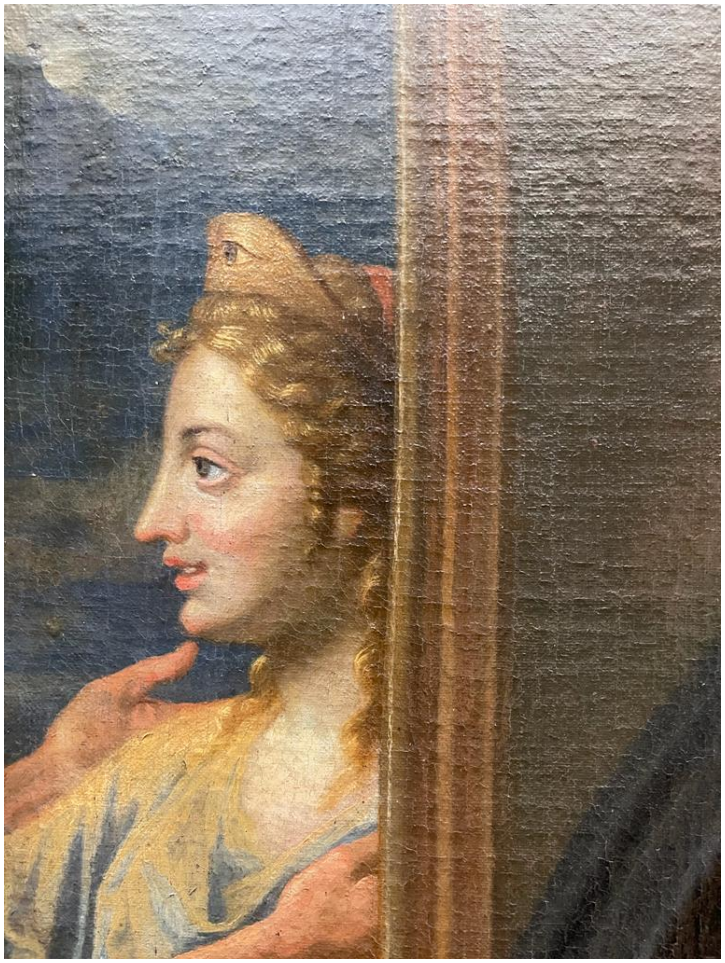

Figure 9: Detail of the figure of painting with the open arms, Self-Portrait

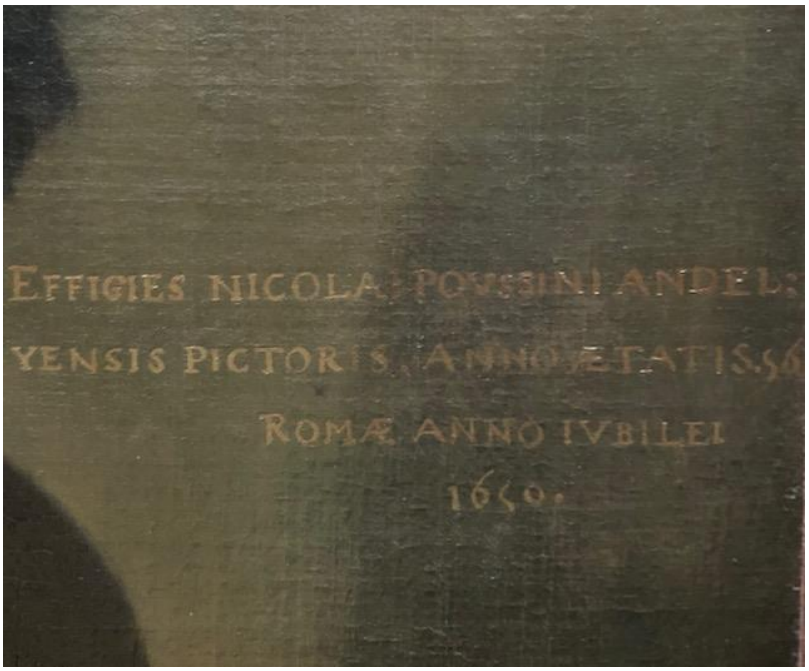

Figure 10: Detail of the Latin inscription, Self-Portrait

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