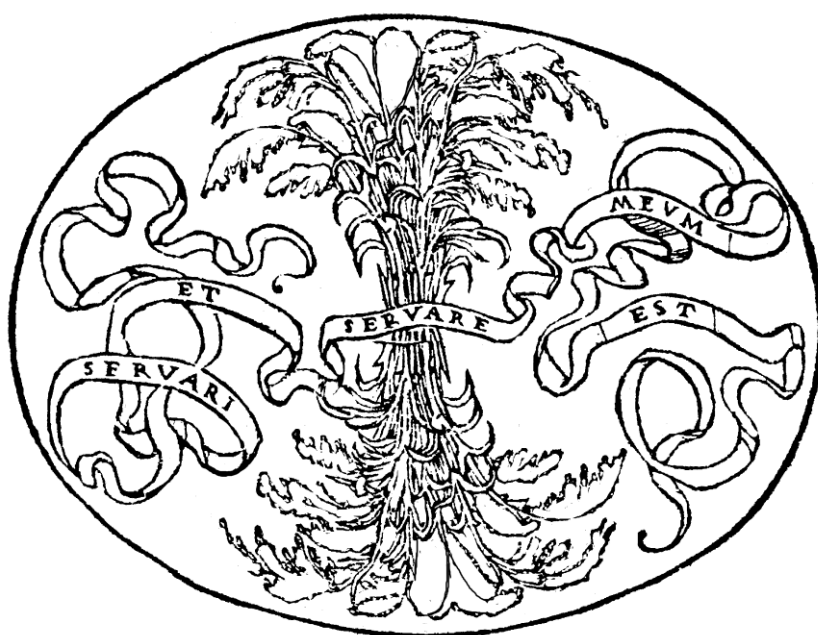


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**«UN PINCEAU DORÉ ET BIEN AMANCHÉ»:  
SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE PAINTING TECHNIQUE OF NICOLAS POUSSIN  
(1594-1665)**

When we read the words that have come down to us from painters and writers on art who had the privilege not only of listening to Nicolas Poussin discoursing, but also talking with him and seeing him paint – foremost among whom is Charles Le Brun who would become the first director of the Académie Royale de Peinture et Sculpture<sup>1</sup>, and André Félibien who would be its first, and short lived, secretary –, the image that they convey is not an image of the artist as traditionally portrayed by the majority of scholarship. It is not one of the ‘classicist’ figure-head of the Poussiniste faction and the ‘intellectual’ painter divorced from the material aspects of his art. This is an image handed down to us by a later generation whose vision was no longer that of Poussin, nor of the cultural circles in which he moved in Rome, steeped as these were in the humanist tradition<sup>2</sup>. A tradition originating with Pythagoras, the ‘father’ of philosophy, a philosophy in which theory and practice were indissolubly linked<sup>3</sup> inherited by the Rome of Cassiano dal Pozzo and his circle<sup>4</sup> via the Florentine humanists whose syncretism they also shared<sup>5</sup>.

Referring to his *Open Work*, Umberto Eco in his *Intellectual Autobiography* puts forward the concept that «the work of art is an *epistemological metaphor* in the sense that in every epoch works of art are conceived so that they reflect concepts proper to the knowledge of the period [...]»<sup>6</sup>. Poussin was an integral part of the culture of the Rome of his time, and it is in this context that he should be studied, rather than from the perspective of later generations imbued with Newton’s positivism and Descartes’ dualism. The Cartesian divorce between mind and hand – a tradition of which we are the inheritors – is anachronistic when discussing the works of this «veritable poète»<sup>7</sup>, in whose works all elements were directed to a single end.

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The original spelling of the sources has been retained throughout the essay, and neither ‘brought up to date’ nor ‘corrected’. Poussin’s spelling is notoriously idiosyncratic, as are Richard Symonds’ notes on painting, written in a combination of abbreviated English and Italian.

<sup>1</sup> Charles Le Brun travelled with Poussin back to Rome in 1642 after Poussin’s brief spell in Paris (1640-1642). He would remain in the city, painting and in close contact with Poussin, until the end of 1645 when he returned to Paris.

<sup>2</sup> Evidence for this divorce from the humanist tradition of the Cassiano/Barberini circle can be gleaned as early as in Le Brun’s lifetime, for example from the almost mocking reception given by fellow Academicians to his symbolic interpretation of colour in his *Conférence on the Ecstasy of St Paul* (FÉLIBIEN/LICHTENSTEIN–MICHEL 2006, pp. 394-401, see below) which was however completely in line with humanist thought. Sébastien Bourdon (in Rome between 1634-1637) speaking on Annibale Carracci’s *Stoning of St Stephen* met with similar incomprehension and dismissal (FÉLIBIEN/LICHTENSTEIN–MICHEL 2006, pp. 239-247). That Poussin was aware of the incomprehension of a great number of his contemporaries, particularly in Paris, who did not share his own humanist ideals and learning, is also made perfectly clear in some of his letters, for instance when he refers in the famous letter on the ‘Modes’ to «ceux qui ne voyent que par les yeux d’autrui» (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 371).

<sup>3</sup> De Piles in his notes to his translation of Du Fresnoy’s *De arte graphica* relates the statement back to Quintilian: «On voit dans Quintilien que Pythagore disoit, que la Théorie n’estoit rien sans la Pratique, & que la Pratique n’estoit rien sans la Théorie» (DU FRESNOY/[DE PILES] 1673, p. 109).

<sup>4</sup> As is well known, Poussin’s circle centred on the figure of Cassiano dal Pozzo, in his *casa* and *museo*, which became an unofficial ‘academy’ after the demise of the Accademia dei Lincei with the death of Federico Cesi in 1630. As Francesco Solinas so perceptively wrote: «È proprio in questo tentativo di universalità indissolubilmente legato alla tradizione dell’umanesimo che risiedeva la sua straordinaria novità» (SOLINAS 1996, p. 218).

<sup>5</sup> The shared belief that «the basic truth [...] runs through all forms of religion, whether Christian or pagan» and «the belief in religion as above sect and creed» (BLUNT 1966-1967, III, p. 187).

<sup>6</sup> ECO 2017, p. 19.

<sup>7</sup> «C’est en quoy ce sçavant Peintre a montré qu’il estoit un veritable Poète, ayant compose son Ouvrage dans les regles que l’Art de la Poésie veu qu’on observe aux pieces de Theatre» (Charles Le Brun’s *Conférence on the Israelites gathering manna in the wilderness*, in FÉLIBIEN/LICHTENSTEIN–MICHEL 2006, p. 174).

Words, their colour, disposition, harmonies and rhythm are the means of expression at the disposal of the poet. The painter's means of expression are not words, but paint and its materials. As the painter Charles-Alphonse Du Fresnoy wrote in his *De arte graphica*, probably begun in Rome in the 1640s<sup>8</sup>, Apelles did not paint with language: «non linguâ pinxit Apelles»<sup>9</sup>.

I am proposing here to use just two paintings as examples of how a study of the materials of a painting, the grammar of their use and the way they have been handled, can add to our understanding of the 'meaning' of Poussin's paintings, when these are read as visual metaphors, figurative embodiments in paint of the beliefs, interests and fields of knowledge and enquiry animating the cultural circle to which he belonged, centred around the figures of Cassiano dal Pozzo and Cardinal Francesco Barberini.

In a letter to his friend and patron Paul Fréart de Chantelou, in which the latter is chastised for being too precipitous in his judgement of the painting that the painter had just sent him which did not please him<sup>10</sup> as he felt it compared unfavourably with the work sent to Jean Pointel, Poussin makes the point that it is the subject that will dictate the way the different elements are brought together<sup>11</sup>, that different subjects will require different materials and handling<sup>12</sup> in order to transmit and induce the appropriate emotion in the person contemplating the work. The painting should be judged with intelligence, and not rapidly and simply with the physical eye, but with the eye of the understanding, of reason – «[les] apêtis n'en doivent point juger sellement mais la raison»<sup>13</sup>, and this requires time and attentive contemplation. To make the matter perfectly clear to Chantelou, Poussin draws the time-honoured parallel between poetry and painting and uses Virgil as an example; he speaks of how the very sound of Virgil's words create the image of the subject – the colour and texture of the words depending on the emotion to be transmitted, and that in this lies «tout l'artifice de la peinture»<sup>14</sup>.

Comme Virgile a observé par tout son poeme, parceque à toutes ses trois sortes de parler, il acomode le propre son du vers avec tel artifice que proprement il semble qu'il mette devant les yeus avec le son des paroles les choses desquelles il traicte, de sorte que où il parle d'amour l'on voit qu'il a artificieusement choisi aucunes parolles douces plaisantes et grandement gratieuses à ouïr, de là où il a chanté un fet d'Arme ou décrit une bataille navale ou une fortune de mer il a choisi des parolles dures aspres et déplaisantes<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> See THUILLIER 1965, HECK 2015. Du Fresnoy was in Rome in the 1640s, and also part of Cassiano dal Pozzo's select circle.

<sup>9</sup> Du Fresnoy's *De arte graphica* in De Piles' translation: «ce n'eût pas avec la langue qu'Apelle a produit de si beaux Ouvrages» (DU FRESNOY/[DE PILES] 1673, pp. 10-11, l. 59).

<sup>10</sup> The *Baptism of Christ* from the second series of *Sacraments* that Poussin was painting for him.

<sup>11</sup> As Tasso observed in his *Arte Poetica*, «le parole devono pendere da' concetti, e prender leggi da quelli» (TASSO 1637, *Discorso terzo*, p. 29v). Tasso was shown by Anthony Blunt (BLUNT 1966-1967, III, p. 361) to have been one of the sources used by Poussin in his *Osservazioni*, published by Bellori as an appendix to his life of the painter (BELLORI/BOREA 1976, pp. 478-481).

<sup>12</sup> «Le Poussin avait de grands égards à traiter differemment tous les sujets qu'il representoit, non seulement par les differentes expressions, mais encore par les diverses manieres de peindre les unes plus délicates, les autres plus fortes: c'est pourquoi il étoit bien aise qu'on connut dans ses ouvrages le soin qu'il prenoit» (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 4), as transmitted to us by Félibien. Letter to his friend the painter Jacques Stella, written circa 1637, well in advance of the so-called letter on the Greek 'Modes' of 1647. See notes 13 and 15 below.

<sup>13</sup> POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 372. Letter to Chantelou, November 24, 1647. This famous letter is often referred to as the letter on the 'Modes'. «Si le tableau de Moïse trouvé dans les Eaux du Nil que possède M. Pointel vous a donné dans l'amour. esse un témoignage pour cela que je l'aye fet avec plus d'amour que les vostres. Voyés vous pas bien que c'est la nature du subiec qui est cause de cet effet, et votre disposition. et que les subiect que je vous traite doivent estre représentés par une autre manière [...] C'est en cela que consiste tout l'artifice de la peinture. pardonnés à ma liberté si je dis que vous vous estes monstré précipiteus dans le jugement que vous avés fet de mes ouvrages. Le bien juger est très difficile si l'on n'a en cet art grande Théorie et pratique jointes ensemble. Nos apêtis n'en doivent point juger sellement mais la raison».

<sup>14</sup> POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 372. See quotation in note 13 above.

<sup>15</sup> Ivi, p. 374.

As the poet paints with words, so the painter will deliver his message, express his *pensée*<sup>16</sup>, through the brush, with colour; on prolonged contemplation its different levels of meaning will unfold – for, as Poussin tells us, you need to study the painting with as much time and attention as it took to paint: «il faut user des mesme moyens à les bien juger comme à les bien faire»<sup>17</sup>. Bernini in 1664, visiting Chantelou's unparalleled collection of works by Poussin, unlike his host spent long before Poussin's *Extreme Unction*<sup>18</sup>, studying it, and absorbing its beauty and 'reading' it, its message disclosed through its material substance, as though a sermon which spoke wordlessly, directly to his soul:

[il] l'a [regardé] debout quelque temps, puis il s'est mis à genoux, pour la mieux voir, changeant de fois à autres de lunettes et montrant son étonnement sans rien dire. A la fin il s'est relevé et a dit que cela faisait le même [effet] qu'une belle prédication qu'on écoute avec attention fort grande et dont on sort après sans rien dire... mais que l'effet s'en ressent au-dedans<sup>19</sup>.

«Grande Théorie et pratique jointes ensemble»<sup>20</sup>

With the aid of a few examples, I hope to demonstrate that Poussin was not a 'classicist' in the academic sense of the word, but a painter in the classical and humanist tradition, that is a painter for whom theory and practice were bound together as they had been for artists in antiquity and the Renaissance.

That colour is an essential part of meaning in a painting is stated quite explicitly by Charles Le Brun when he introduces his *Conférence on the Israelites gathering manna in the wilderness*<sup>21</sup>. Addressing his fellow painters, he tells them that he has chosen a painting by Poussin rather than a work by Raphael, as they had, because the latter works have altered with time, and no longer have the appearance intended by Raphael, while he could be sure of his interpretations of Poussin's painting because the colours in the painting before him (the *Conférences* took place in front of the work to be discussed) were as they had been when the artist had painted them. Of this he could be sure because he had observed Poussin at work:

quand l'on a examiné les Peintures de Raphaël & des Peintres de son siescle, chacun a donné beaucoup à ses conjectures & déferé à ses propres sentimens, parce que les couleurs dont ils se sont servis, n'ayant pas conservé leur premier éclat ny leurs véritables teintes, l'on ne voit pas bien tout ce que ces grans hommes ont représenté, & l'on ne peut plus juger de tout ce qu'ils ont mis de beau dans leurs Ouvrages. Mais comme il a eü l'avantage de converser souvent avec ce grand homme dont il entreprend de parler, & que les Tableaux, ont encore le mesme lustre, & la mesme

<sup>16</sup> «Je lui ei trouvé la pensée. Je veus dire la conception de l'idée et l'ouvrage de l'esprit est conclu» (letter to Chantelou, December 22, 1647, POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 376).

<sup>17</sup> From a letter to Chantelou, March 14, 1642, in which he writes, responding to Chantelou who had looked at many pictures on his travels down to Rome, telling him that this time «vous aurés cueilli avec plus de plaisir la fleur des beaux ouvrages qu'autrefois vous n'aués vues qu'en passant sans les bien lire. Les choses esuelles il i a de la perfection ne se doivent pas voir à la haste mais avec temp jugement et intelligence, il faut user des mesme moyens à les bien juger comme à les bien faire» (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, pp. 121-122).

<sup>18</sup> Second series, painted for Chantelou, now on loan from the Duke of Sunderland to the National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh.

<sup>19</sup> CHANTELOU/STANIĆ 2001, p. 89.

<sup>20</sup> «Le bien juger est très difficile si l'on n'a en cet art grande Théorie et pratique jointes ensemble» (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 372. See note 13 above).

<sup>21</sup> FÉLIBIEN/LICHTENSTEIN–MICHEL 2006, pp. 156-174. For the first edition which includes Félibien's important preface and engraving, see FÉLIBIEN 1669.

vivacité des couleurs qu'ils avoient lors qu'ils donnaient les derniers traits, il en pourra dire son sentiment avec plus de connoissance & de certitude que les autres<sup>22</sup>.

André Félibien tells us that during his time in Rome (1647-1649) he also had the privilege of watching the artist at work when Poussin would put into paint (giving «une sensible démonstration»<sup>23</sup>) the abstract and theoretical teachings that he had imparted through the spoken word: «et c'estoit pour lors que joignant la pratique aux enseignemens, il me faisoit remarquer en travaillant, & par une sensible démonstration, la vérité des choses qu'il m'apprenoit par ses discours»<sup>24</sup>. Attempting to put into practice – and paint – what he had learnt from Poussin's «doctes leçons»<sup>25</sup>, led Félibien to realise that «quelque theorie qu'on ait de la Peinture, on est incapable de rien exécuter de parfait sans une grande pratique; & c'est en travaillant que je me suis bien aperceû qu'il se rencontre mille difficultez dans l'exécution d'un Ouvrage que tous les préceptes ne scauroient apprendre à surmonter»<sup>26</sup>. An echo of Galileo's wry comment «altri posseggono tutti i precetti del Vinci, e non saprebber poi dipignere uno sgabello»<sup>27</sup>.

In his fifth *Entretien*, devoted largely to the subject of light and colour, Félibien again aligns theory alongside practice, the art of the orator (citing Hermogenes) alongside the necessity of the artist's complete mastery of the materials at his disposal; of the latter he gives a very precise example, that of the bluish-grey tint – *berrettino* – which results if you mix charcoal black with white. Mixing another type of black pigment, such as bone black or soot black, would result in a dullish ashen colour<sup>28</sup>.

Car comme les Sciences & les Arts ont quelque ressemblance les uns avec les autres; les Peintres ont cela de commun avec les Orateurs, que de même qu'il n'est pas possible, selon le témoignage d'Hermogenes, de bien faire une Oraison, & de sçavoir comment elle doit être composée, si l'on ne sçait auparavant quelles sont les choses qui doivent y entrer, aussi est-il difficile à un Peintre de bien colorier les corps qu'il veut représenter, s'il ne sçait la force des couleurs qu'il veut employer,

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<sup>22</sup> Ivi, p. 157. As we have observed above, the importance of colour to the meaning of the painting is also stressed by Le Brun in a later *Conférence* on the *Ecstasy of St Paul* where he interprets each of the colours of the vestments of the angels and of St Paul in a symbolic vein. Cf. ivi, pp. 394-401.

<sup>23</sup> FÉLIBIEN 1685-1688, I, *Préface*, n.p.

<sup>24</sup> «Bien qu'il affectast d'être fort retiré quand il travailloit, afin de ne pas estre obligé de donner entrée chez luy à plusieurs personnes qui l'auroient interrompu par leur visites trop fréquentes je vivois néanmoins de telle sorte avec luy, que j'avais toujours la liberté de le voir peindre; et c'estoit pour lors que joignant la pratique aux enseignemens, il me faisoit remarquer en travaillant, & par une sensible démonstration, la vérité des choses qu'il m'apprenoit par ses discours» (*ibidem*).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>27</sup> «sí come ci son molti che sanno per lo senno a mente tutta la poetica, e poi sono infelici nel compor Quattro versi solamente; altri posseggono tutti i precetti del Vinci, e non saprebber poi dipignere uno sgabello» (GALILEO/FAVARO 1890-1909, VII (1897), p. 60).

<sup>28</sup> This property of charcoal black was well-known at the time. Richard Symonds, for instance, in his notes taken between 1649-1651 at the feet of Poussin's colleague and friend, the painter Giovan Angelo Canini, writes: «Negro carbone da un Turchino p.che s'usa nella aria, & nelli panni. Blewish» (SYMONDS/BEAL 1984, p. 226, fol. 25). This blue-grey colour referred to as the «color berrettino dilettevole all'occhio», much prized, was in this instance the optical mixing in the eye of woven threads – black and white (ZACCOLINI 1618 ca, I, fols 32v-33). Father Matteo Zaccolini was a lay Theatine monk and painter, author of a treatise on colour, light and shadow, linear and aerial perspective in four volumes, and an influence of inestimable importance to Poussin's practice, and thought. As Félibien tells us, what he learnt is not to be looked for in Poussin's writings, but in his paintings: «il s'est contenté d'avoir montré par ses propres Peintures, ce qu'il avait appris du Père Zaccolini» of whom Félibien had further noted «Il n'y a point eu de Peintre qui ait mieux sçû que ce Père, les regles de la Perspective, & qui ait mieux compris les raisons des lumieres & des ombres. Ses écrits sont dans la Bibliothèque Barberine & le Poussin qui en avait fait copier une bonne partie, en faisoit son étude» (FÉLIBIEN/PACE 1981, p. 113, fol. 16/2). For the figure of Zaccolini see Janis Bell's many excellent publications.



& l'effet qu'elles produiront quand elles seront mêlées ensemble: comme quand le noir de charbon est mêlé avec le blanc, le Peintre doit sçavoir qu'il en naîtra une couleur d'un gris bleuâtre<sup>29</sup>.

It is also of interest to note that in this passage Félibien not only links together all the different arts and sciences, emphasizing what they have in common rather than their divergence (in line with Vitruvius and classical thought), but that he also chooses to cite Hermogenes' *On Types of Style*. This work, from the Renaissance onwards, became a standard text and is cited by Franciscus Junius<sup>30</sup> (to whom Poussin refers in one of his last letters<sup>31</sup>) among others. The particularity of the text is that its author goes even further than Cicero for whom style had to be appropriate to content. For Hermogenes, as for Virgil in the treatment of words in poetry – and as for Poussin, I maintain –, content and its expression are one<sup>32</sup>.

### *Absorbent and reflectant grounds*

The paintings illustrated in Figs 1a-d-e are examples of how Poussin has consciously chosen and manipulated his materials to a desired effect, and this already in what is considered the most 'mechanical', preliminary, level of the painting process, that is the choice and application of the ground – layers often applied by the 'apprentices' in the painter's studio. By this date, canvas could also already be bought 'ready primed', as we know from Richard Symonds<sup>33</sup>.

Two of the paintings in question have unanimously been recognised as owing a debt to Raphael and Domenichino, the two artists that Poussin most revered: *Apollo and the Muses on Parnassus* (Museo del Prado, Madrid) (Fig. 1d) which bows to Raphael's fresco of the same name in the Vatican *Stanza*, and the *Triumph of David* (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London) (Fig. 1e) which looks to Domenichino's fresco in San Gregorio Magno al Celio (*Flagellation of St Andrew*), which Poussin greatly admired<sup>34</sup>. All scholars have remarked on the 'blond' palette of these works as well as their compositional debt to the frescos.

The third work illustrated, and the one to have been analysed by the author, is one of Poussin's last figurative works, the *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well* in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Fig. 1a). When micro-samples from the painting were analysed, the analyses indicated the presence of an initial ground layer consisting of calcium sulphate, that is gesso, bound in a water-based glue medium (Fig. 1b)<sup>35</sup>, tinted with a few earth-pigment particles. Such an initial layer would be very absorbent, leaching out the oil medium from subsequent layers and resulting in a final 'rough' surface scattering white light which would mix with the coloured reflected light from the pigment particles (see Fig. 1c) resulting in the desaturated, 'blond', tonalities associated with fresco painting. The visual properties deriving from such an application were well understood at the time, as were its drawbacks as can be seen from this

<sup>29</sup> FÉLIBIEN 1725, III, n. 5, pp. 13-14.

<sup>30</sup> JUNIUS 1638, Book III, pp. 271-272.

<sup>31</sup> «Après avoir considéré la Division que fait le Seigneur Franc. Junius des Parties de ce bel art Jay osé mettre icy brièvement ce que j'en ay appris». Letter of March 1, 1665, to Roland Fréart de Chambray, translator of Leonardo's 1651, *editio princeps*, *Trattato della pittura* for which Poussin had drawn the original illustrations. Poussin was acknowledging receipt of his book *Idée de la perfection de la peinture* (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 462).

<sup>32</sup> For further discussion of this aspect, I refer you to my PhD thesis (GLANVILLE 2021-2022, p. 54 ff.).

<sup>33</sup> Symonds complained that the «imprimers» – who prepared canvases for artists commercially in mid-seventeenth-century Rome – left out the lead white (presumably for questions of profit): «Terra Rossa, biacca da Corpo a little & Creta un tantino negro Carbone. He complayned the ordinary imprimers putt in no biacca. Creta is usually sifted & grind in oyle»; all of Titian's paintings have also been found to have an initial very thin layer of gesso beneath their oil-bound grounds.

<sup>34</sup> BELLORI/BOREA 1976, p. 427.

<sup>35</sup> GLANVILLE–ROUSSELIÈRE ET ALII 2014.



Fig. 1a: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, 1660-1665, 96,5x138 cm, oil on canvas. Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum (PD.38-1984). © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Fig. 1b: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, cross-section from the bottom edge of the painting. The arrow indicates the lowest layer of ground which is calcium sulphate (gesso) tinted with earth pigment particles bound with animal glue. Author's photograph in collaboration with the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Fitzwilliam Museum

Fig. 1c: Diagrammatic representation of the behaviour of light, according to different media. Author's drawing

Fig. 1d: Nicolas Poussin, *Parnassus*, 1630-1631, 145x197 cm, oil on canvas. Madrid, Museo del Prado (P002313). © Photographic Archive Museo Nacional del Prado

Fig. 1e: Nicolas Poussin, *The Triumph of David*, 1631-1633 ca, 118,4x 148,3 cm, oil on canvas. London, Dulwich Picture Gallery (DPG236)

note by Richard Symonds, recording the words of Giovan Angelo Canini (pupil of Domenichino, who knew Poussin, shared his interests, and moved in the same cultural circle):

Those clothes that have gesso in the impr[imitura] the gesso makes the colour fresher & does drink up the malitia of the oyle but they crack sooner & that is the worst of the gesso. Dopoi [sic] si fa la 2da mano d'imprimatura della medesima roba - piu macinate, piu sode con olio ancora di lino<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> SYMONDS/BEAL 1984, p. 219, fol. 12.

Gesso is brittle by nature, and becomes increasingly so with age; in addition, because it is bound with animal glue which is an aqueous medium, it also remains susceptible to humidity which makes the layer swell, the combination of the two can result in substantial loss in the paint layers<sup>37</sup>. This is what has occurred in *Eliezer and Rebecca* which is covered with a myriad of tiny losses resulting in a slightly 'blurred' appearance that has led some art historians to consider it unfinished<sup>38</sup>.

With the results of this analysis in mind, analytical and conservation reports on the paintings in Dulwich Picture Gallery and the Prado were re-examined. The ground in the *Triumph of David* consists of calcium sulphate (gesso), iron oxides, lead white and charcoal black, and the surface of the painting was described by the restorer, Sophia Plender, as having a very matt appearance resulting from a «rough, leanly-bound surface»<sup>39</sup>. This simulates – with an oil medium – the appearance of Domenichino's fresco, the *Flagellation of St Andrew*, which scholarship acknowledges as a primary influence on the composition. A similar effect was noted by the restorer of the *Parnassus* in the Prado, a painting in dialogue with Raphael's treatment of the subject in his fresco in the *Stanza della Segnatura*. Unlike the two other Poussin paintings which have this fresco-like finish and palette, and have been found to have an absorbent initial tinted gesso ground (and therefore one that is relatively pale), the ground in *Parnassus* is red, applied in two layers. A characteristic of red earth pigments and clays is – as Symonds was informed by Giovan Angelo Canini – their absorbency, «they doe prosciugare»<sup>40</sup>, and indeed it is described by the restorer of the *Parnassus*, Rafael Alonso Alonso, as having a very absorbent ground<sup>41</sup>. He also felt that Poussin had made deliberate use of the texture of the twill canvas, to achieve an effect that was not that of a traditional oil painting «que Poussin acentuò intencionalmente [...] Es como si el pintor hubies etratado de busca rexpresamente un efecto estetico diferente de lo que es un oléo tradicional»; he continues «la calidad dura, apretada y seca dela pintura, ne propia de un oléo». Alonso Alonso had previously restored Poussin's *Triumph of David* (also in the Prado), considered by many to be roughly contemporary, and remarks «La calidad pictórica es diferente» and most interestingly «el Parnaso parece una pintura mural»<sup>42</sup>.

Further, and contrasting, evidence of Poussin's manipulation or interest in the materials and application of what is – as I observed above – generally considered the most 'mechanical' aspect of painting (that is the ground) is to be found in perhaps the most moving of the series of seven sacraments painted by Poussin at the end of the 1630s for his friend and patron Cassiano dal Pozzo – the *Extreme Unction* in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (Fig. 2). Scholarship is undivided in its appreciation of its luminous qualities, as well as seeing in it an example of both the artist's and the patron's interest in the Early Church<sup>43</sup>, a Church that recognised the continuity between the religious rites – the mysteries – of antiquity and the

<sup>37</sup> «Con il gesso si gioca di fortuna, perché si vede assai pitture antiche sconcerti per il gesso, e molte ancora si conservono» (*VOLPATO MANUSCRIPT* 1967, p. 731). The «Volpato manuscript» is thought to be of Northern Italian/Venetian origin and to date to the latter part of the 17<sup>th</sup> century as it refers to Padre Lana's text, published in 1670.

<sup>38</sup> NICOLAS POUSSIN 1994, p. 510.

<sup>39</sup> PLENDER–BURNSTOCK 2014, p. 56.

<sup>40</sup> *Prosciugare* means to 'dry matt', as a result of the ground being so porous and absorbent. Cf. SYMONDS/BEAL 1984, p. 218, fol. 10.

<sup>41</sup> The painting was restored in 1982-1983; all the following material is derived from the restorer's report. I am grateful to the European IPERION - ARCHLAB programme that enabled me to travel to the Prado and consult the archival material, to Lola Gayo and Maité Javier for all their generosity in sharing material and carrying out analyses, and to Ana González Mozo and Laura Alba for all their help in accessing reports and archival material.

<sup>42</sup> Conservation report, and my translation: «It is as if the painter had expressly sought an aesthetic effect different from that of a traditional oil painting», commenting on the «the hard, tight, dry quality of the paint, not typical of an oil painting». «The quality of the paint is different [...] the *Parnassus* looks like a mural painting».

<sup>43</sup> GLANVILLE 2023.

sacraments of the Christian Church, the word *sacramentum* being the Latin equivalent of the Greek *mysterion*<sup>44</sup>.

As in the paintings discussed above, in this work too Poussin has adapted the ground layers to the desired final effect. In contrast to the works above, in *Extreme Unction* an additional third layer of ground is present which completely masks the weave of the canvas, resulting in a smooth and therefore reflectant surface (Figs 3a-c). Two further elements contribute to the luminous qualities of the painting: the colour of the ground, which is what Giovanni Battista Armenini described as «fiammeggiante»<sup>45</sup>, and the surprising inclusion of glass shards<sup>46</sup> which will further enhance the luminous and specular qualities of the ground and paint, and which further indicate a desire for luminosity.



Fig. 2: Nicolas Poussin, *Extreme Unction*, 1638-1640, 95,5x138 cm, oil on canvas. Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum (PD.11-2012). © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

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<sup>44</sup> BLUNT 1966-1967, III, p. 187. Blunt makes the point that the early Fathers of the church «made considerable play with the parallels between the Mysteries of Greek religion and the Sacraments of Christianity». See also GENDLE 1981.

<sup>45</sup> A «color di carne, con un non so che di fiammeggiante» that 'helps' the colours (ARMENINI/GORRERI 1988, p. 143).

<sup>46</sup> GLANVILLE 2021-2022, p. 394.

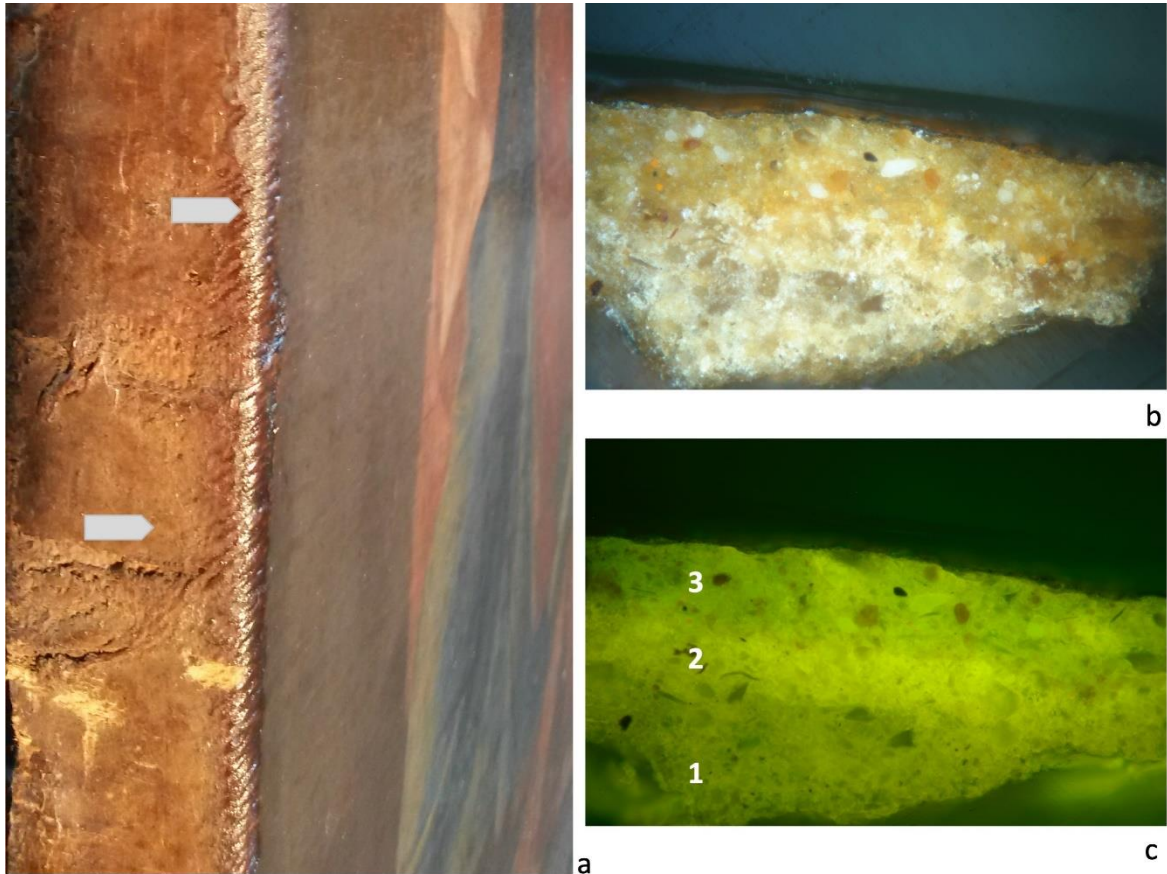


Fig. 3a: Left tacking edge of *Extreme Unction* (Fig. 2). The top arrow indicates where the twill weave of the canvas is visible at the turn-over edge. The lower arrow indicates how this is hidden by the ground layers, an unusual application of three layers. Author's photograph

Fig. 3b: Cross-section of a sample taken from the left tacking edge of *Extreme Unction* (x200, photograph taken in reflected light). Author's photograph in collaboration with the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Fitzwilliam Museum

Fig. 3c: Cross-section of a sample taken from the left tacking edge of *Extreme Unction* (x200, photograph taken in UV light). The three layers of ground which are thick enough to mask the canvas weave are more clearly distinguishable in UV light. Author's photograph in collaboration with the Hamilton Kerr Institute, Fitzwilliam Museum



Fig. 4: Nicolas Poussin, *Extreme Unction*, detail of the figure of the smiling girl exiting to the right. © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

The subject of the painting is the moment of transition between life and death. Writing in 1644 to Chantelou, his friend and patron, for whom he was about to paint a second version of the *Extreme Unction*, Poussin spoke to him of «le transis» – literally ‘the passage’, the passing over, the crossing of the threshold from life into death – as a subject worthy of an Apelles, adding «Car il [Apelles] se plaisoit fort à représenter des transis»<sup>47</sup>. In the Christian religion and in the course of human life, this is the last sacrament administered; consecrated oil (a symbol of the spirit as is light) is symbolically placed on the parts of the body that denote the senses that are no longer active. This rite conferred divine grace and illumination, in the painting depicted

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<sup>47</sup> POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 266. Letter to Chantelou, April 25, 1644.

and incorporated – literally – in the light of the ‘Sun’ («simulacrum»<sup>48</sup> of God) which floods the entire composition from the window in the top left-hand of the painting, and to the luminosity of which the materials and application of the preparatory layers contribute. The scene – set on a stage<sup>49</sup> – represents a man on the point of death, surrounded by those he loves and who love him, about to receive the gift of divine grace – the consecrated oil, but also represented by the light entering from on high on the left, as has been observed above. It is not by chance that it is the infant who is first touched by the light – symbol of the soul that enters the body on birth, and on the point of death – at the end of man’s little life played out on the worldly stage – leaving the body to return whence she came: the smiling, dancing figure exiting to the right, clad in the colours of light – white and yellow<sup>50</sup> (Fig. 4). Blaise de Vigenère, whose fulsomely annotated translation of Philostratus’ *Eikones* (*Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture*), has been shown by scholars to have been one of Poussin’s favoured sources, amplifies Socrates’ words in the *Timaeus*, on the departure of the soul from the earthly prison of the body to return to its divine origins «Que si nosz sens pouvoient appercevoir l’ame en son allegresse combien elle est joyeuse & contente d’estre delivree de cette orde & infecte chartre, nous aurions certes si grand desir de laisser cette vie, que personne n’y voudroit demeurer»<sup>51</sup>.

*Colour and pigments: «Pulchritudo ut divinae bonitatis vestibulum»*<sup>52</sup>

«Li colori nella pittura sono quasi lusinghe per persuadere gli occhi, come la venustà de’ versi nella poesia»<sup>53</sup>. These are Poussin’s words in his *Osservazioni* as relayed to us by Bellori. They are not to be understood to mean, in my opinion, that colours in a painting are merely superficial enticements for the physical eye<sup>54</sup>. Sight, since antiquity, has been considered the most noble of senses because it allows us to perceive the beauty of nature and the heavens, that «gran veridico libro della natura»<sup>55</sup>, a reflection of the beauty, order and harmony of the divine. Colour is the «sweet honey of the Muses» referred to by classical authors (Lucretius in the *De rerum natura* for instance), with which to render palatable the at times indigestible kernels of truth.

«In the same way our doctrine often seems unpalatable to those who have not sampled it, and the multitude shrink from it. That is why I have tried to administer it to you in the dulcet strains of poesy, coated with the sweet honey of the Muses»<sup>56</sup>. Like Lucretius, with colour and pigments rather than verse, Poussin might have said: «My object has been to engage your mind

<sup>48</sup> «O Sole [...] per fine simulacro immortale & incorrotibile dello stesso Iddio». Marino also cites, in parallel, Psalm 18:6 «Posuit in Sole tabernaculum suum» (MARINO 1622, *Pittura*, p. 14v).

<sup>49</sup> Both a *theatrum mundi* of the ancients, and as also referred to by Poussin in his correspondence (POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 235, for example, letter to Chantelou, December 21, 1643). Félibien, in *L’idée du peintre parfait* refers to painting as a piece of theatre, with each character playing his or her role. «On doit considérer un Tableau comme une Scène, où chaque Figure jouë son role» (FÉLIBIEN 1707, p. 34). It is well known that Poussin first created his compositions with small wax figurines set on a stage within an enclosed ‘theatre’ box.

<sup>50</sup> «Comme le blanc & le jaune participant le plus de la lumiere», Sébastien Bourdon’s *Conférence*, December 3, 1667 – *Christ healing the blind men* (FÉLIBIEN/LICHTENSTEIN–MICHEL 2006, pp. 175-184).

<sup>51</sup> PHILOSTRATE DE LEMNOS 1597, p. 53; «when the bonds no longer hold, and are parted by the strain of existence, they in turn loosen the bonds of the soul, and she, obtaining natural release, flies away with joy» (PLATO/JOWETT 1961, l. 81d).

<sup>52</sup> Deriving from Proclus originally (see also Plato’s *Philebus*), and a commonly held belief amongst artists and humanists of the Neoplatonic bent, beauty is perceived as the «vestibule to the divine» that is, giving access to the divine (cited by ROWLAND 1994, p. 96).

<sup>53</sup> BELLORI/BOREA 1976, p. 481.

<sup>54</sup> Although, paradoxically, colours do ‘belong’ only to the surface of objects observed in the visible world; even in a rainbow, as there is no colour not only without ‘light’, but also without ‘matter’ (moisture droplets in the instance of the rainbow) (see the *De lumine et umbra* that Bellori has inserted as the frontispiece of his *Vita* of the painter).

<sup>55</sup> CESI/ALTIERI BIAGI–BASILE 1980, p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> LUCRETIVUS/ROUSE–SMITH 1924, ll. 933-935.

with my verses while you gain insight into the nature of the universe and the pattern of its architecture»<sup>57</sup>.

Using as an example the handling and disposition of three pigments in particular – vermilion, green earth and lapis lazuli – in two works painted for the Dal Pozzo brothers – the *Extreme Unction* (Fig. 2) painted for Cassiano at the end of the 1630s, and one of his last works, the *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well* probably painted in the 1660s for Carlo Antonio, I hope to demonstrate how Poussin’s use of pigments contributes to the deeper, spiritual and cosmological meanings of the paintings, common both to the *prisca theologia* of the ancients and the Christianity of the Early Church.



Fig. 5: (left) Nicolas Poussin, *Extreme Unction*, detail of the central group of the *transis*. © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; (middle) XRF map for mercury (Hg) indicating the presence of vermilion; (right) XRF map for potassium (K) indicating the presence of green earth

The illustration above (Fig. 5) is a detail of the central action of the painting – alongside which are the corresponding XRF maps<sup>58</sup> for mercury (Hg), which denotes the presence of the pigment vermilion, and potassium (K), which is the characteristic element present in addition to iron in green earth pigments, and also present in lapis lazuli.

From the XRF map, we can see that Poussin has used vermilion to give touches of light to the tips of the ears of the deacon and the women on the left, linking them together and across to the young woman mourning on the right, who is fully lit by the sun. Vermilion as well as a red earth is used in the deacon’s garment, and has also been mixed into the pallium of the anointing priest to give the golden hue we see. This is deliberate on the part of Poussin, because such a tonality could have been achieved with existing yellow pigments<sup>59</sup>, but the use of a pigment in different areas of colour and mixtures ‘unites’ a composition in the same way as light does in the natural world, in which there are no «colori schietti» – all the colours we perceive are mixtures because light is present even in the darkest recesses, as they are in *Extreme Unction*. Poussin is creating his work in emulation of that of the Creator, the *summum artifex*<sup>60</sup>.

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<sup>57</sup> Ivi, ll. 948-950.

<sup>58</sup> XRF mapping provides information on the distribution of individual elements (through their characteristic X-ray fluorescence) and therefore pigments, mapping their presence on the surface of the painting.

<sup>59</sup> These curious ‘mixed’ oranges and golden colours were also found in the Richelieu *Bacchanals*, painted shortly before the Dal Pozzo series of *Sacraments*, and they play a similar role uniting the figures within the ‘closed’ world of the composition as a whole.

<sup>60</sup> I would refer you to GRAND-CLÉMENT 2010 and 2015 for an excellent discussion of the cosmological aspects of artistic creation in antiquity.



The potassium (K) map shows the strong presence of green earth in the robe of the second weeping woman on the left, and this columnar green then sweeps across, around the red of the deacon's pallium to the sleeve of the mother cradling the dying man's head, down to the blanket covering the dying man – with the weak red and green, of his seeping life-force<sup>61</sup>. Potassium in the head-dress of the woman carrying the infant relates to the presence of lapis lazuli, not used pure but mixed and dulled, tonally true for the position of the woman in relation to the source of light and the composition as a whole. We find both green earth and lapis (distinguishable through their respective hues) in the veil and drapery of the woman to the right, again a link in the chain that binds all the figures together; the colours flow one into another, as they do in the natural world, bound together by light, symbol of divine love and its earthly counterpart.

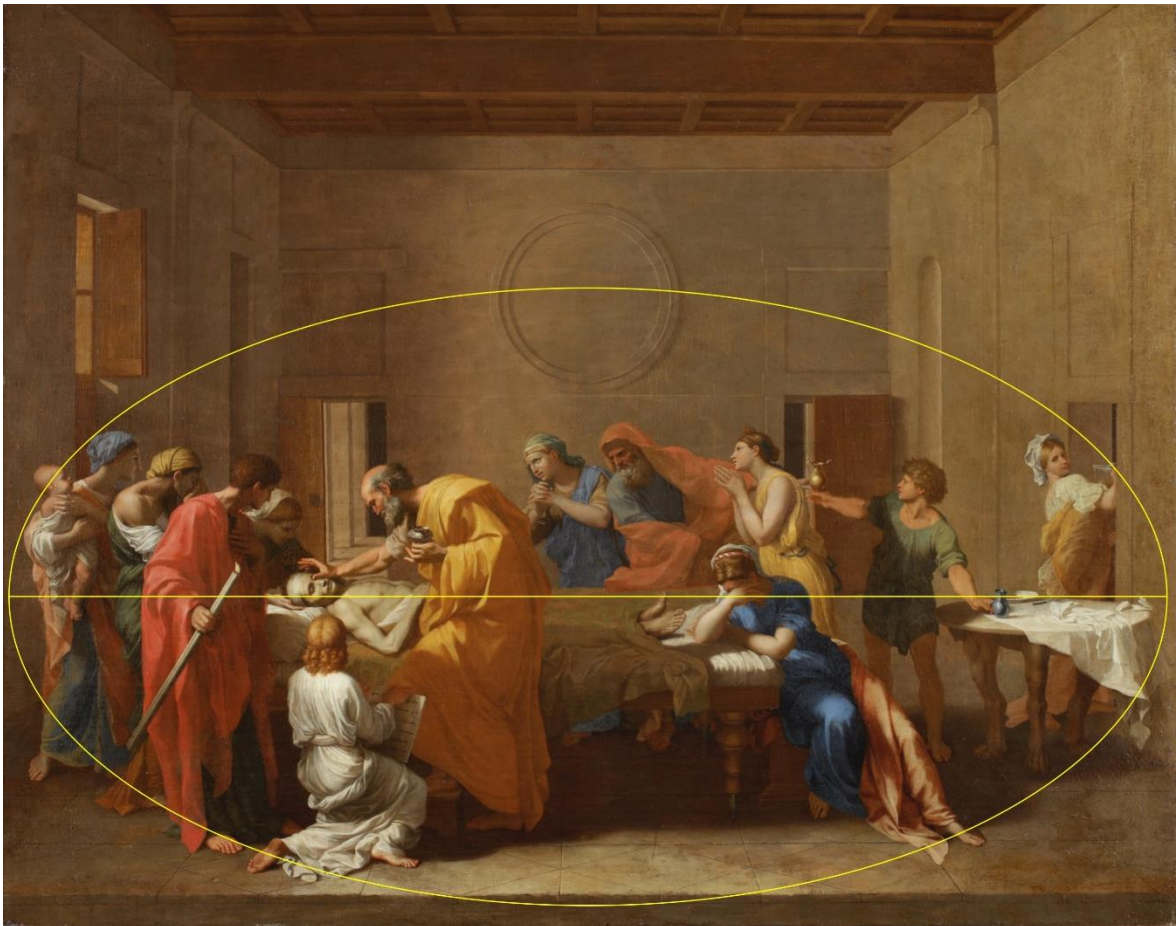


Fig. 6: Nicolas Poussin, *Extreme Unction*, 1638-1640, 95,5x138 cm, oil on canvas. Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum (PD.11-2012). © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Author's diagrammatic representation of the co-existence of man's linear progress through life, and the never-ending cycle of generation and dissolution in nature

<sup>61</sup> PHILOSTRATE DE LEMNOS 1597, pp. 433-434, cites Empedocles for red as the colour of life, of the «esprit de la vie». «For when moisture and heat unite, life is conceived, and from these two sources all living things spring» (OVID/MILLER-GOOLD 1916, Book I, l. 431); «veri colori solo essere, quanto li elementi, quattro, da i quali più e più altre spezie di colori nascono. Sia colore di fuoco il rosso [...] dell'acqua il verde» (ALBERTI/BERTOLINI 2011, p. 221 (Book I, ll. 199-206)).

The linear representation of the existence of man – from the moment the soul enters his body at birth to the moment the soul joyously leaves the bonds of its earthly prison – as conceived by the Stoics in the wake of Plato co-exists with the circular flow of Stoic cosmology (Fig. 6), where death is not an end, but part of the endless and dynamic circle<sup>62</sup> of dissolution and generation, in which «everything which seems to perish merely changes»<sup>63</sup>, and as Montaigne writes:

La mort est l'origine d'une autre vie [...] C'est la condition de votre création, c'est une partie de vous que la mort: vous vous fuyez vous-mêmes [...]. Le premier jour de votre naissance vous achemine à mourir comme à vivre [...]. Votre mort est une des pièces de l'ordre de l'univers; c'est une pièce de la vie du monde<sup>64</sup>.



Fig. 7: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, 1660-1665, 96,5x138 cm, oil on canvas. Cambridge, The Fitzwilliam Museum (PD.38-1984). © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

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<sup>62</sup> As symbolised by the architectural circle on the back wall. See GLANVILLE 2023 for a discussion of this circular form as the *ouroboros* on the back wall.

<sup>63</sup> SENECA/GUMMERE 1917, Epistle XXXVI, p. 253.

<sup>64</sup> MONTAIGNE/THIBAUDET 1946, p. 105. Montaigne, citing Seneca; and citing Heraclitus: «Et puis nous autres sottement craignons une espece de mort, là où nous en avons desjà passé et en passons tant d'autres. Car non seulement, comme disoit Heraclitus, la mort du feu est generation de l'air, et la mort de l'air generation de l'eau mais encor plus manifestement le pouvons nous voir en nous memes [...] [he proceeds to go through the ages of man] et le jour d'hier meurt en celuy du jour d'huy, et le jour d'huy mourra en celuy de demain; et n'y a rien qui demeure ne qui soit tousjours un» (ivi, p. 590).

Another example of Poussin's use of a pigment to bind together a composition, also giving material form to a what is essentially a metaphysical and religious concept in the broadest sense of the terms, is Poussin's use of lapis lazuli in the late *Eliezer and Rebecca* (Fig. 7). Natural ultramarine, lapis lazuli, is the only blue pigment employed in the painting and its use is not confined to the blue drapery and sky as one might have expected, but is present in all the blues and greys whatever their tonality, as well as in the green drapery of the kneeling woman and the foliage of the landscape, where it is mixed with a little lead antimony yellow and perhaps some glauconite (one of the two types of green earth) (Figs 8a-d). The use of ultramarine throughout the composition again brings a harmonic unity to the work, but also underlines, in material terms, the 'unity' of all creation, a subject much at the fore in philosophical debates of the day, and at the core of both Virgilian verse and that of Lucretius, as we have seen above.

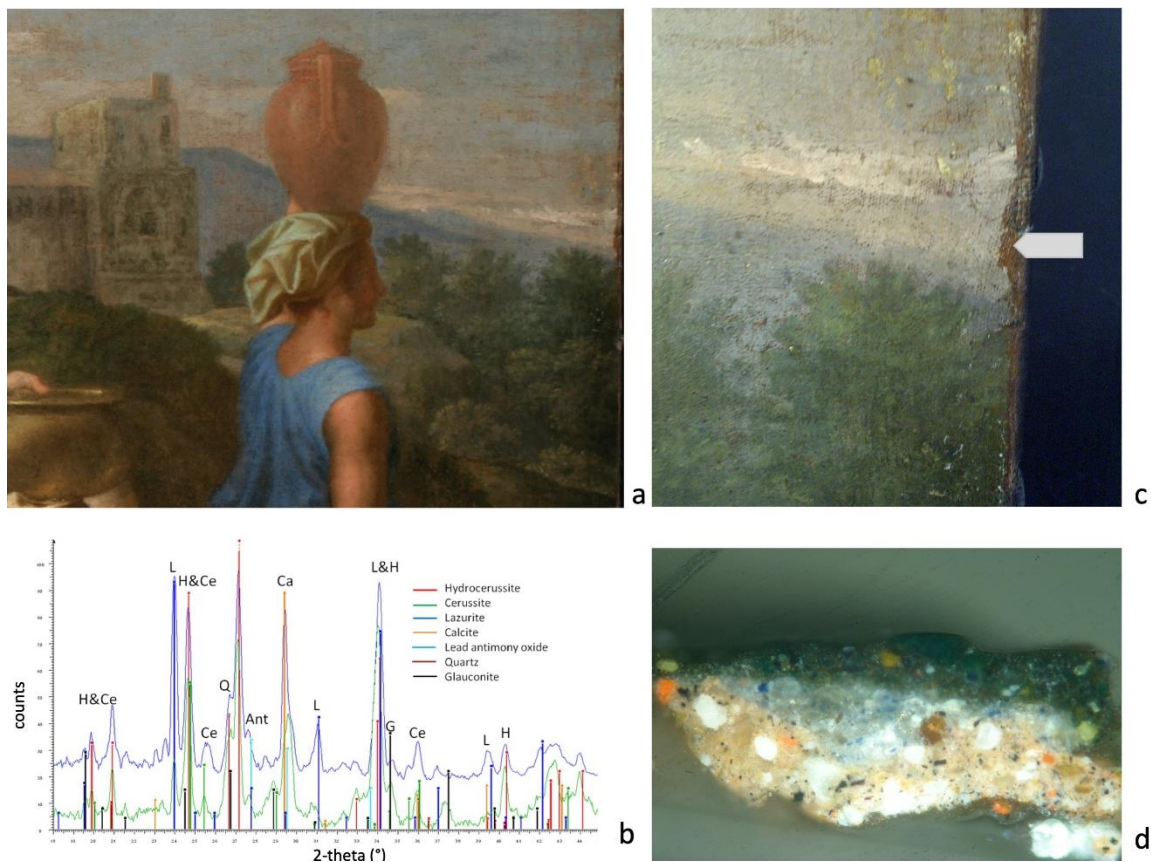


Fig. 8a: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, detail. Analysis has shown the presence of lapis lazuli not only in the azure gown and in the sky, but also in the foliage and landscape and head-dress. © The Hamilton Kerr Institute (Chris Titmus) and The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge

Fig. 8b: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, X-Ray diffraction diagram corresponding to two areas analysed in the painting: blue drapery (blue line) and green foliage (green line). As might be expected, one notes much lapis lazuli (lazurite) used in the blue, but only a little less in association with lead antimony oxide (yellow), and a little glauconite, in the green

Fig. 8c: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, detail of the right-hand edge of the painting. The arrow indicates location of the micro-sample

Fig. 8d: Nicolas Poussin, *Eliezer and Rebecca*, cross-section sample, showing the thin tinted gesso ground covered by two priming layers, the uppermost one of a pinkish hue. The following layer is that of the

sky containing mostly lead white and lapis lazuli, the final layer a ‘mixed’ green of the hills of the landscape, also containing lapis lazuli among other pigments

That lapis lazuli should be used to paint landscape and foliage when it is perhaps the most expensive of pigments, even when not of the highest quality, indicates that there are other thought processes at play in its use than simply its cost, which is what is commonly emphasized.

Padre Lana (who had been closely involved with Athanasius Kircher and the Cassiano dal Pozzo circle of which Poussin was part in the early 1650s in Rome) gave similar information for the ubiquitous use of ultramarine:

ma prima faccio una tinta di azzurro oltremarino, pigliando del meno perfetto, [this would be ultramarine ashes] con un poco di biacca, della quale mi servo per unire con quasi tutte le altre tinte [...] ed in altre porrò alquanto di azzurro oltremarino, il quale cagiona un mirabile effetto in tutti i colori, ed in particolare usato moderatamente nella carnagione, poichè le da una certa aria, e lume celeste, che la rende suave, e dolce. In oltre, perchè in ciascun corpo reale oltre li quattro elementi de’ quali è composto, evvi mescolata la luce, e dove questa manca, resta il corpo oscuro, e tenebroso<sup>65</sup>.

Lapis lazuli’s association with the divine was two-fold – the highest quality pigment, of the purest colour, originated in the mines of Afghanistan, and analyses showed that this was indeed the origin for the pigment used<sup>66</sup> for the celestial blue worn by the figure exiting to the right. She is reminiscent of Raphael’s figure in the *Incendio di Borgo*, celestial beauty bearing water, symbol of the spiritual – the water that Rebecca offers Eliezer in contrast to the gilded baubles and jewels that he offers her, brought to the well on a laden camel. Afghanistan since the earliest Middle Ages was identified as the location of the Garden of Eden. Father Matteo Zaccolini gives us a further insight into the symbolic value of the stone, speaking of it as though it were the heavens that had entered the bowels of the earth: «[...] ed il lapis lazuli quasi che quaggiù basso fra le Viscere della terra volesse formare un’altro cielo di color Azzurro [...]»<sup>67</sup>, going on to write that its purest form was found in the propinquity of gold – the terrestrial incarnations of the Sun and the heavens<sup>68</sup>.

### *Some thoughts in conclusion*

What letters and words are to the poet, pigments and colours are to the painter. The ‘colour’ and meaning of a word will depend on the choice and order of the letters, and its meaning on its context in the verse. Lucretius makes the parallel between the letters and words of his verses, and the elements in nature, which will alter in appearance and meaning according to their order, ‘mixture’ and context: «Moreover, it is important in my own verses with what and in what order the various elements are placed. For the same letters denote sky, sea, earth, rivers, sun, the same denote crops, trees, animals»<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> LANA DE TERZI 1670, pp. 151-152. The possible presence of lapis lazuli in the flesh – referred to by Padre Lana above – has at present proved impossible to confirm.

<sup>66</sup> Inferior quality lapis was used in the different mixtures throughout the painting.

<sup>67</sup> «ed il lapis lazuli quasi che quaggiù basso fra le Viscere della terra volesse formare un’altro cielo di color azzurro» (ZACCOLINI 1618 ca, I, fol. 51v).

<sup>68</sup> «Il più perfetto è l’oro, generandosi nella più perfetta parte della terra, essendo posto in quella, come il sole sia [per]le sfere Celesti, poichè si come quello solo sta circondato in tutto di color celeste apparente, così anche a guisa di questo sta posto l’oro puro nelle miniere della Terra di color celeste, e questa pietra si chiama Lapis Lazuli, e gli scrittori dicono, che i più fino oro è quello, la cui vena sia frà la pietra azzurra, e per questo alcuni dissero che quello era una luce condensata fra la Terra» (ivi, fols 30v-31).

<sup>69</sup> LUCRETIVS/ROUSE-SMITH 1924, II, ll. 1015-1016.

The «veritable poète» such as Lucretius or Poussin will emulate «la Real Pittura fatta dall'istessa Natura» by understanding the *ragioni* behind appearances, and following the same processes in «la finta pittura»<sup>70</sup>. Painting, as practiced by Poussin with «un pinceau doré et bien amanché»<sup>71</sup>, is the emulation of a dynamic process, and not the imitation of a product.

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<sup>70</sup> «Dimostrando la real Pittura fatta dall'istessa Natura, la quale essendo quella che haverà à esser tuttavia posta avanti all'occhio del Pittore, essendo il vivo esemplare della finta Pittura, fatta dall'istesso Pittore» (ZACCOLINI 1618 ca, II, fol. 3v).

<sup>71</sup> POUSSIN/JOUANNY 1911, p. 266. Letter to Chantelou, April 25, 1644.

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## ABSTRACT

Umberto Eco in his *Intellectual Autobiography* referred to the concept that he had introduced in *Opera aperta*, the work of art as an ‘epistemological metaphor’, in the sense that «in every epoch works of art are conceived so that they reflect concepts proper to the knowledge of the period».

It is from this perspective, from the cultural context of his own times and the humanist milieu of the circle of Cassiano dal Pozzo – and not from the Cartesian perspective of the next generation –, that, with the help of a few examples from the works of Nicolas Poussin, I shall consider the central role played by colour in transmitting the artist’s *pensée* and the deeper ‘meaning’ of the subject matter.

I shall be discussing the role played by the physical nature and by his choice of materials in the significance of the work; how his practice reflects his understanding of ‘natural philosophy’ in terms of the nature of light, colour and perception and how he uses these to express his *pensée* in the very smallest detail, in the manner of poets and musicians.

Like Virgil who, to quote from Poussin’s well-known letter to his friend and patron Chantelou, «il accomode le propre son du vers avec tel artifice que proprement il semble qu’il mette devant les yeus avec le son des paroles les choses desquelles il traicte, de sorte que où il parle d’amour l’on voit qu’il a artificieusement choisi aucunes parolles douces plaisantes et grandement gratieuses à ouir, de là où il a chanté un fet d’Arme ou descrit une bataille navale ou une fortune de mer il a choisi des parolles dures aspres et déplaisantes».

Umberto Eco nella sua *Autobiografia intellettuale* fa riferimento al concetto – già introdotto nell’*Opera aperta* – dell’opera d’arte come ‘metafora epistemologica’, nel senso che «in ogni epoca le opere d’arte sono concepite in modo da riflettere concetti propri della conoscenza dell’epoca».

È secondo questa prospettiva, nel contesto culturale del suo tempo e dell’ambiente umanistico della cerchia di Cassiano dal Pozzo – e non nella prospettiva cartesiana della generazione successiva –, che, con l’aiuto di alcuni esempi tratti dalle opere di Nicolas Poussin, prendo in esame il ruolo centrale del colore nella trasmissione del pensiero dell’artista e del ‘significato’ più profondo del soggetto rappresentato.

Discuterò del ruolo svolto dalla natura e dalla manipolazione dei materiali scelti dall’artista, del loro apporto al significato dell’opera; del modo in cui la pratica dell’artista riflette la sua comprensione della ‘filosofia naturale’ in termini di natura della luce, del colore e della percezione, usati per esprimere il pensiero nei minimi dettagli, alla maniera di poeti e musicisti.

Come fa Virgilio che, per citare la nota lettera di Poussin al suo amico e mecenate Chantelou, «il accomode le propre son du vers avec tel artifice que proprement il semble qu’il mette devant les yeus avec le son des paroles les choses desquelles il traicte, de sorte que où il parle d’amour l’on voit qu’il a artificieusement choisi aucunes parolles douces plaisantes et grandement gratieuses à ouir, de là où il a chanté un fet d’Arme ou descrit une bataille navale ou une fortune de mer il a choisi des parolles dures aspres et déplaisantes».