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Beautifully and thoughtfully presented: on the Nicolas Poussin catalogue raisonné

The first volume of a long-awaited work of scholarship

by [JONATHAN UNGLAUB](#) | 10 February 2017



Poussin's *The Israelites Gathering the Manna in the Desert* (1639), made for Paul Fréart de Chantelou, was one of the most celebrated works to enter the royal collections of Louis XIV of France (Photo: © Mathieu Rabeau/RMN-Grand Palais)

Nicolas Poussin: les Tableaux du Louvre is an initial instalment of the long-awaited catalogue raisonné of the paintings of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) by Pierre Rosenberg. A towering figure in the study of French Old Masters since the 1970s, Rosenberg was the director of the Musée du Louvre between 1994 and 2001, and before that, for many years the chief curator of the Louvre's department of painting.

The catalogue builds on Rosenberg's seminal works from 1994 marking the painter's 500th anniversary: the catalogue raisonné of the drawings (written with Louis-Antoine Prat) and the catalogue of the landmark Grand Palais exhibition. In the intervening years, Rosenberg organised the 2008 exhibition Poussin and Nature: Arcadian Visions (Bilbao and New York), devoted to the artist's reinvention of the Classical landscape. He distils all of this deep thinking about Poussin into the present volume, rendering it a definitive work on the master. Quite simply, no one knows his art better.

Rosenberg here presents 40 of the museum's works by Poussin, an extraordinary survey, studded with masterpieces and far surpassing the holdings of any other institution. He devotes one chapter to the development of this remarkable ensemble. While the first Poussin in the collection was a royal commission (The Institution of the Eucharist, 1640), the majority were acquired during the reign of Louis XIV (1643-1715) through intermediaries. The king allegedly secured the Duc de Richelieu's 13 canvases following a wager on a tennis match.

Many works came from the collections of Poussin's two foremost French patrons, correspondents and friends, Paul Fréart de Chantelou and Jean Pointel. Nonetheless, major works—most notably the second set of the Seven Sacraments—managed to elude the royal collection. The 18th century was a dry spell, despite the superb collection amassed by the Duc d'Orléans, the king's nephew and regent to Louis XV, which was ultimately dispersed to England. One senses Rosenberg's regret that the Louvre's Poussin collection is merely the largest, rather than fully comprehensive.

The 1994 exhibition and catalogue coincided with and spawned an outpouring of new Poussin scholarship, which continued for the next decade, including the discovery of new works (two of them in the Louvre). A new catalogue has long been needed to evaluate this bounty succinctly in the context of a systematic, chronological review of the painter's output. This catalogue has an excellent critical apparatus—beyond a full provenance, each entry features an extensive, more or less complete, list of references to works that address the particular painting, keyed to an exhaustive bibliography. Rosenberg affirms that many studies, especially those more historically grounded, enrich our understanding of Poussin, though he is sceptical of the accumulation of recondite interpretations, often with vying claims, attached to some of the best-known works.

In the valedictory Four Seasons, for instance, Poussin distils a lifetime of pictorial sagacity in constructing imposing seasonal landscapes to stage a series of Old Testament narratives. Interpretations have ranged from tracing an analogical subtext of Christian judgment, death and salvation to discerning a Neo-Stoic order of natural cycles detached from providence.

Rosenberg writes: "Such analyses neglect, too much so to our eyes, the essential, extraordinary beauty of these landscapes, their harmonious equilibrium, the observed details so judicious that they hardly detract from the vision of the whole, their freshness of invention, their colours suited to each of the seasons, the tender greens of Spring, the blonde wheat of Summer, the lavender blues of Autumn, the glacial greys of interminable rain in the Deluge." As such, like Denis Mahon before him, Rosenberg is defending Poussin's supreme merit as a painter, as a visual composer of tales, against his reputation as a "peintre-philosophe", embodied in Anthony Blunt's monolithic portrait of Poussin as the rational, Stoic scholar-artist.

The more recent scholarship of Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey shows with greater nuance how Poussin engaged productively with the antiquarian learning and literary culture of his time, in terms of shared intellectual values, rather than the strict determination of cultural context on artistic form. Given Poussin's commitment to pictorial narrative, it is hardly surprising that his paintings have served as case studies of semiotic theory, paralleling 17th-century theories of the sign.

Nowhere is this more true than in The Israelites Gathering the Manna in the Desert. Here, Poussin attempted to stage the complete plot of famine, miracle and salvation within the unified space of the pictorial field. Aware of his radical experiment, the artist instructed the patron, "Read the story and the picture". Scanning the picture from left to right, like a text, one registers the significance of each figure group, reconfiguring the climactic sweep of the narrative. Rosenberg wonders: "Have not the multiplication of figures (like the multiplication of interpretations), the too numerous biblical and visual references, the rigorous, ambitious discipline, to which Poussin had willingly submitted himself, stifled somewhat this inspiration, this inventiveness that one so frequently admires in the artist?"

For Rosenberg, then, such emphasis on the pictorial structure of narration can get in the way of responding to the visual refinement of the artist's work—a unique beauty that emerges through calibration instead of visceral allure, and requires sustained looking. Rosenberg has a point, and no one has a more profound understanding of Poussin's unique painterly sensibility, as the vivid pictorial analyses throughout the volume testify. But are such aims necessarily mutually exclusive? To some degree, might Poussin's beauty reside in the elegance of his visual eloquence—and even how his evocative pictures might accommodate more esoteric exegesis when a certain plausibility is demonstrated?

The publisher has admirably assisted Rosenberg in making the case for the “délectation” of Poussin's painted oeuvre—in terms of visual production, the catalogue could hardly be more compendious, or lavish. Each entry features a full-page illustration, several large and telling details, images of related drawings, early engravings and Gobelins tapestries, and comparative material. For a 400-page volume of such splendour, coupled with the authoritative and insightful text, the list price of €39 is a steal. This preview makes one eagerly anticipate the full catalogue raisonné, wherein the entirety of Poussin's work will be so beautifully and thoughtfully presented.

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