

Location. Location. Location. And not only in real estate. The Louvre self-portrait (1650) has been famous for centuries. Its sternness, its hanging judge implacability, became Poussin's (1594–1665) public persona in France. How easy it is to imagine generations of academicians cowing young apprentices into submission with this image of high seriousness and moral rectitude. “That, young man, is what painting can and should be.” The altogether gentler and friendlier Berlin self-portrait (1649) languished in obscurity until after World War II, when it was shown at the Louvre in 1960 in the first ever major exhibition of Poussin's work. It still awaits absorption into the master's oeuvre on the equal footing it deserves with its more famous twin. But the brutal downsizing it underwent at some point in its history has seriously disadvantaged it. A glance at an early engraving shows just how much was lost—mostly from the top, but from the bottom and sides as well. The original dimensions can be found in the inventory of its commissioner—Jean Pointel—and they're comparable with those of the other painting. In fact, these two works cannot be understood in isolation but need to be thought about as a pair.

Poussin's own testimony has prejudiced discussion; and again, as luck would have it, in favor of the Paris work. His half of a correspondence with one of his greatest Parisian patrons has survived. It registers Fréart de Chantelou's request for a self-portrait, the artist's initial disinclination, then his ultimate acquiescence. But now, it has become a question of two self-portraits, the other for fellow Parisian patron and rival for Poussin's work, Pointel. In strictest confidence, the artist promises Chantelou that he'll send him the one that turns out best and that proved to be the one that was painted second. Poussin's own judgment, plus arguments from “practice making perfect” have cast a shadow over the Berlin work. We don't have the painter's correspondence with Pointel, but could it have been just as manipulative?

Poussin was nothing if not deliberate. An idealizing artist, faced with a task he found unsuited to his temperament, what had finally tipped the balance, and made it seem worthwhile to paint, not just one self-portrait, but two? When finished, they were sent off from Rome together. Upon arrival in the small world of Parisian connoisseurs where Pointel and Chantelou knew one another, they would have caused quite a stir of conjecture. What could they mean? What did Poussin want his countrymen and posterity to think of him? At the least, that he couldn't be summed up in a single image; that he was neither courtier nor man of the world à la Rubens; and furthermore, that his identity as artist was quite enough for

NICOLAVS POUSSINVS ANDELTENSIS ACADEMICVS ROMANVS TRINVS
PICTOR ORDINARIVS LYDOWICI IVSTI REGIS GALLIÆ. ANNO D^{omi}nⁱ 1649. Roma.
ÆTATIS SVÆ. 55.



Nicolas Poussin

Self-portrait, 1649

Oil on canvas

51 x 25 1/2 inches

Gemaeldegalerie, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin

Photo credit: Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz / Art Resource, New York



Nicolas Poussin
Self-portrait, 1650
Oil on canvas
38 1/2 x 29 1/8 inches
Louvre, Paris

Photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux / Art Resource, New York



Nicolas Poussin
The Sacrament of Ordination
1647

Oil on canvas
46 x 70 inches
National Gallery of Scotland,
Edinburgh

him. He had rejected the flattery and enticements of the French court and church, wriggled free of their suffocating patronage, and found in Rome a place where he could pick his own subjects, work at his own pace, and be immersed in the richest possible cultural medium that Europe had to offer at the time. There is pride in this story of achieved freedom of action and it gives him the right to judge others, hold them up to a high standard (the Paris painting), and, alternatively, to forgive, to relent, to show a graceful indulgence for humanity's need to disport itself, kick up its heels in sheer delight at being alive, at being embodied (the Berlin painting). To put it starkly, he presents himself for our inspection as consummate painter-poet of Comedy and Tragedy. But even at this extreme level of generality, and despite his endorsement of one portrait over the other, it is my belief that each one was intended, *from its conception*, for the patron who ended up with it.

Chantelou had the wisdom to commission Poussin's second set of *The Seven Sacraments* (1664–68), but then had the folly to express disappointment in *Ordination* (1647) when it arrived, and go on to voice jealousy over Pointel's *The Finding of Moses* (1647). The artist brought out big guns in response, patiently explaining, and at length, that different subjects require different treatments, on analogy with ancient Greek and Roman artistic practice in both music and poetry. This letter (1647) had a huge impact over the centuries on the artist's reputation as thinker and erudite man of letters, and it wasn't until the 1930s that those interested in such matters



learned that, in fact, he had cribbed his arguments from a 16th-century treatise. But secondhand had served its purpose—managing this ungrateful patron—and it was no better than he deserved. However, the biggest gun readied for poor Chantelou didn't discharge until 1650, when the self-portrait arrived in Paris. No matter how clear your conscience, would you really want to face those eyes every time you came home? And there's just no avoiding them either, since they're held in the viselike grip of powerful compositional forces which extend, right and left, to the edges of the canvas—the picture frames running behind the sitter's head, just above and below his eyes. In *Ordination*, Poussin had found splendor, majesty and grandeur in a subject made difficult by its large cast of characters. Thirteen adult males are deployed with amazing lucidity as they participate in the founding of what was, arguably, the most successful nongovernmental organization in history. It was Chantelou's idiocy not to see this, and Poussin's genius to hold him and us—forevermore—*up to the mark*. He who laughs last laughs best.

And the other patron? Pointel knew what he liked and was unashamed to ask for it. On occasion, this proved to be beautiful women displayed in profusion. The aforementioned *Moses* reliably provided for an exotic princess complete with entourage of charming ladies-in-waiting. But *Eliezer and Rebecca* (1648), with its lone, gift-bearing male at the center—cause of the outwardly eddying responses of thirteen lovely females—might be mistaken for any red-blooded man's idea of heaven. It's hard not to smile as you gaze at this gentle, gracefully braided dream of marital fulfillment's first promises. And it's hard not to see a smile playing about

Nicolas Poussin

Eliezer and Rebecca

1648

Oil on canvas

46 1/2 x 78 1/4 inches

Louvre, Paris

Photo credit:

Erich Lessing / Art Resource, New York



Nicolas Poussin
The Birth of Venus

1635 or 1636

Oil on canvas

38 1/4 x 42 1/2 inches

The George W. Elkins

Collection, 1932.

Philadelphia Museum of Art,

Philadelphia

Photo credit: The Philadelphia
 Museum of Art / Art Resource. New York

Poussin's lips, in his eyes, about his entire person, in the portrait he sent to Pointel. Complicity? Approbation? Of course. It's a pact, sealed in their mutual appreciation of life's lighter moments. These two paintings, with their prominent pillars placed off to the side, could almost be pendants. Only a year separated *Ordination* and *Eliezer and Rebecca*.

Mobility of expression is as central to the meaning of the Berlin self-portrait as fixity of regard is to the other, and it's achieved by extremely subtle means. Helped by the sharp slash of white at the neck, the great swag of sculpted laurel leaves pulls up and out to the left and right, lifting the head free of the torso, cradling it in a charmingly tilted, almost lolling manner. This is no longer stern judgment, but judgment suspended, the balancing of thoughts in the entertainment of possibilities. Note the sharp contrast of dark and light on the right side of the face and the wriggling contour that it describes. This contour is in our peripheral vision as we gaze into the eyes of the sitter, seeking to read his thoughts. Our own eyes are constantly making tiny involuntary jumps called saccades. Without them, our field of vision would fade through a process called adaptation. Each jump restimulates the nerves of our retinas by bringing them a fresh burst of information from a slightly different part of the field. That wriggling

contour could be pulling at our peripheral vision in one jump, or pushing back at it in another. This back and forth produces a sensation of flickering.

But there are many touches, both great and small, which re-enforce messages of solemn judgment without appeal, on the one hand, and compassionate forbearance on the other: the hair, now parted in the middle, now on the side; the garment, complex in Paris, tripartite, with a quiet silhouette and an emphatic stabilizing horizontal at pectoral level, clamped down by the lower-right hand corner; only a cape and robe in Berlin, but with an agitated silhouette that just skirts the sides of the painting, leaving it room to heave and swell against the ground; the difference between a single, clawlike hand, coming down hard, firmly grasping; and the graceful insouciance of a resting working hand (holding a drawing tool) draped over its fellow at the wrist, as it takes a break from its labors. These contents, which I hope to have shown to be patron-specific, addressed to unique historical personages, also fan out into enormous categories of experience through the process of thought association. Let's take the plunge:

Berlin	Paris
Comedy	Tragedy
Sculpture and Drawing	Painting
Light	Color
Myth	Sacred and Profane History
Nudity	Costume
Spectacle and Dance	Ritual Pomp
Revelry	Gravity
Seduction	Rectitude
Pleasure	Suffering
Play	Duty

We could extend these lists without ever meaning to suggest that a hard line of separation exists between them. (Nudity mixes with sacred history in a baptism, as does dance in a worship of the golden calf; myth can be cruel, but even at its fiercest, offers a shame-free zone for the celebration and enjoyment of human beauty). But we do affirm that the self-portraits were discussed and understood in these terms, or ones very much like them, when they arrived in Paris. It's even likely that Pointel and Chantelou arranged for them to be shown side by side, the better to compare and contrast in precisely the way we've been doing.

All of this is one painter's history and conjecture. But any artist worth his salt will have made it a longstanding habit to examine and analyze as thoroughly as possible just what it is that a given painting makes him "feel" and then, just how, exactly, those "feelings" are caused. Art historians have missed the big subject here because they failed to ponder the

little differences. Painters learn that nothing is trivial in a great work of art, not even how the hair is parted. Yet effects may operate only on the pre-conscious mind. Alas, the conscious mind, so easily distracted by its love for words, often goes off on a tear, chasing its own tail. An astonishing amount of ingenuity has been lavished on the midlevel left-hand section of the Louvre canvas. The little allegory to be found there is red meat for seasoned Poussinistas and I gladly leave them to it. Their chewing and fighting will never be done.

It is sobering to remember, however, that when the Berlin self-portrait re-emerged from its cleaning some fifteen years ago, something was missing—the title *De lumine et colore*—which had, for centuries, been on the spine of the book which Poussin holds. Considering it to be a later addition, the restorer had covered it over. The consternation which this caused can be imagined, as that title had spawned no end of speculation. If the restorer was correct, whoever had caused those words to be put there had paved over the meaning of the portrait with his own verbiage. He's had a lot of imitators since. Will those words reappear some day?

We cherish the fine arts because they introduce us to fine minds, and sometimes, even great ones. Depth *and* Breadth, Color *and* Light, Complexity *and* Lucidity, Play *and* Responsibility—if these things matter to you, then Poussin's your man. Seeing his two self-portraits side by side and not in a temporal sequence or as entries in a contest can only deepen our sense of his range and humanity. We describe ourselves, paint our own self-portraits, when we seek to narrow him. We can have both the playfully sublime and the sublimely playful. We can know the worst, still do our best, and produce the occasional smile. But to make that easier, we need every example we can find of inner calm, resolution, joyful love, and disciplined passion.