



## Teachers' notes for a detailed talk on Poussin's *Extreme Unction*

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### POUSSIN – THE MAN

Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) is perhaps the best known classical artist of 17th century France. Born in Les Andelys, Normandy, in 1594, he left home at the age of eighteen for Rouen and then Paris, to study anatomy, perspective and architecture. There he developed a love for the works of classical antiquity and made a number of failed attempts to reach Rome. In 1624, he arrived in Rome, the art capital of Europe, where he became part of the colony of Northern artists in Rome; the French artist Claude Lorrain was his neighbour and friend. In 1639 Poussin was invited to Paris to work for King Louis XIII, but returned to Rome in 1642, where he lived for the rest of his life. Poussin married Anne-Marie Dughet in 1630, but the couple had no children. In 1642 Poussin complained of a hand tremor, and his health declined in the 1650s but continued to paint until 1664, a year in which his wife died and also when Poussin was unable to complete his last painting of Apollo and Daphne, which was presented to Cardinal Massimi, working in Rome under Pope Clement X, unfinished. Poussin died on 19 November 1665, and was buried in the church of San Lorenzo in Rome with a simple service, as he had requested.

### POUSSIN – THE ARTIST

Poussin's professional career as an artist began in 1624 at the age of 30 when he moved to Rome. In 1627 the Pope's nephew, Cardinal Francesco Barberini (1597-1679), commissioned a painting of the Death of Germanicus from Poussin, which was completed the following year. Through him, Poussin met Cassiano dal Pozzo (1588-1657), who was secretary to the Cardinal, and Poussin asked Cassiano for help: "I am ill most of the time and have no other means of survival but the work of my hands." Cassiano befriended Poussin and became his most important Italian patron until the former's death in 1657. Poussin experimented with a number of different styles and subjects including Biblical and mythological scenes and landscapes. He was commissioned in 1628 to paint a large scale altarpiece for St Peter's in Rome: The Martyrdom of St Erasmus, but the painting came under considerable criticism and he subsequently turned to making easel paintings for private patrons.

During the 17th century, Rome attracted a large number of foreign and native artists, archaeologists and scholars who were exploring the classical past through ancient literature and excavations that were taking place throughout the city. Poussin lived near the Forum, became associated with a scholarly circle, and made drawings after antique sculpture and remains. Poussin's own studies in preparation for his paintings were informed by Cassiano's renowned Museo Cartaceo or 'Paper Museum'. This consisted of numerous high-quality drawings after well-known antiquities and all types of ancient Roman artefacts and provided documentary evidence of Roman custom and architecture. While Poussin's religious views are unclear, it is certain that he shared the interest of contemporary churchmen in the early history of Christianity, probably as an aspect of his fascination with ancient Rome and archaeology.

In his own time, members of the French Academy of Painting and Sculpture founded in 1648, analysed Poussin's work to develop rules which would ensure the creation of what they perceived to be "great art".

## POUSSIN'S WORKING METHODS

Unlike many 17th-century artists, Poussin did not use assistants. He worked slowly, dividing his day into regular periods for exercise, painting and conversation. Recent research has shown that, despite all this careful preparation, Poussin often altered aspects of the composition during the painting process. He began a painting by researching the subject and made notes before starting preparatory drawings. Once the artist had made a design he transferred it to a canvas from squared drawings, and then painted on the canvas. According to his biographer Bellori, Poussin often worked from life models, and this is evident in the figures of his early works.

From contemporary descriptions we know that Poussin would model small nude figures in soft wax and set them on dowels on a stage which would then be set within a box. Carefully placed openings in the walls of this box would allow him to control the fall of light. Poussin would then make tonal wash drawings of individual groups, focusing on the light and shade of the composition.

The figurines would then be draped with wet cloth to allow him to study the fall and modelling of the drapery. He would often recreate these studies using living models. In constructing his box or 'grande machine' ('great machine') he introduced a single eye-hole at the front, from which viewpoint he would study and then draw the composition. In *Extreme Unction* it is possible to guess what each person in the painting is thinking or saying from their pose, gesture and expression. The composition of this painting has been used in a recent reconstruction of this working method, commissioned by the Fitzwilliam Museum.



## EXTREME UNCTION – THE HISTORY OF THE PAINTING

Extreme Unction - one of a set of seven Sacraments - was painted in Rome in 1638-40, commissioned by Cassiano dal Pozzo, and hung in a room he named after them, the Stanza de'Sagramenti, in his palace in Rome. The series has an intriguing history which reveals the popularity of Poussin for 18th century British collectors. Their tastes and acquisitions, often developed and secured on the Grand Tour to Italy, had a significant impact on British art, architecture and design. On Cassiano's death in 1657, the paintings were inherited in turn by various members of his family, eventually entering the ownership of Maria Laura dal Pozzo Boccapaduli. At some point before 1745, members of the Boccapaduli family attempted to sell the series to the well-known British collector, Sir Robert Walpole, former Prime Minister; but the importance of the paintings was such that the Pope denied them an export license. In 1785, the series was sold for £2,000 to Charles Manners, 4th Duke of Rutland and brought to England. Shortly after, they were exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London, giving members of the public the chance to view the works. King George III was amongst those who visited, accompanied by the painter and president of the Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds.



## THE TRADITION OF THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

The Latin word sacramentum means "a sign of the sacred." Of the Christian sacraments, Protestants generally recognize two, Baptism and Communion, and Catholics seven. The seven sacraments are ceremonies that point to what is sacred, significant and important for Christians.

Few painters took up the challenge of representing these subjects before Poussin, and none appears to have done so as a series of separate canvases. His patron, dal Pozzo, had an interest in Roman artistic and material culture, but was also living and working in the Counter-Reformation Church. Since the 16th century, the Protestant Reformation had denounced papal authority and contested the validity of the seven sacraments.

### Poussin chose five specific episodes from the Bible:

- Baptism, with St John baptising Christ; a familiar religious scene symbolising the act of Christ receiving God's grace.
- Penance, with Magdalene washing Christ's feet in the house of Simon the Pharisee. The figures recline on an ancient banqueting table or triclinium, in accordance with ancient Roman practice. This painting was destroyed by fire in 1816 at Belvoir Castle, and is now known through this engraving by Jean Dughet (1614–1676).
- Ordination, with Christ giving the keys to St Peter. In the Catholic faith, this act symbolised Christ appointing Peter as the first Pope, invested with absolute authority on earth. This scene shows the influence of Raphael's tapestry cartoons of the same subject created for the Vatican's Sistine Chapel, which Poussin is likely to have known (now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London).
- Marriage, with the marriage of the Virgin Mary and Saint Joseph.
- Eucharist, also known as Holy Communion, is represented through the depiction of the Last Supper.

For the remaining two sacraments, he referred instead to liturgical events in the early Church.

- Confirmation, which shows a priest anointing the forehead of a child with chrism, a consecrated oil, whilst another places a fillet or headscarf on a second child, watched by a group of mothers and children.
- *Extreme Unction*, depicts a dying man anointed with oil in accordance with the rites of the ancient Roman Church.

Poussin disregarded all references to the contemporary and purely devotional, painting the themes as he imagined them taking place in ancient Roman times. Poussin drew on his extensive study of the art and artefacts of classical antiquity to represent the costumes, setting, and the structure of the paintings themselves.

The series is no longer complete: in 2012 *Extreme Unction* was acquired by the Fitzwilliam Museum; *Marriage*, *Eucharist* and *Confirmation* have been generously lent to the Fitzwilliam by The Trustees of the 11th Duke of Rutland's 2000 settlement. *Penance*, was destroyed by fire in 1816, *Baptism* was sold in around 1939 and is now in the National Gallery of Art, Washington and *Ordination* was sold in 2011 to the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas.

In 1796 the second set of Sacraments arrived in England, originally painted by Poussin for the French Ambassador to the Papal Court, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, in 1644-48. Now in the collection of the Duke of Sutherland, they are on long-term loan to the Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

## THE SUBJECT OF EXTREME UNCTION

The last moments of someone's life is not an easy subject for a painting – indeed many people find it difficult to talk about death today. Extreme Unction deals with the moments before death when the Catholic Church administers the rites of Extreme Unction, the Sacrament of Anointing the Sick. Unction means "anointing with oil" and extreme refers to the fact that the sacrament was usually administered in extremity, in other words when the person to whom it was being given was in grave danger of dying. It was previously most commonly administered to the dying, for the remission of sins and the provision of spiritual strength and health. In modern times, however, its use has been expanded to all who are gravely ill or about to undergo a serious operation and the Church stresses a secondary effect of the sacrament to help a person recover his health and for spiritual strength.

According to a description written of the painting in 1672 by Poussin's biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori, many of the figures in the painting bear an identifiable relationship to the dying man.

Behind him is his mother; holding his head while the priest anoints his eyes.

Accompanying the priest are two acolytes, one holding a candle, the other kneeling.

At the foot of the bed is the dying man's wife, covering her face in an express of inconsolable grief. Behind her is their daughter, her hands joined in silent prayer.

Next to her is an elderly man – presumably a doctor or apothecary – who distractedly hands a flagon to a youth while directing his gaze to the dying man.

At the centre another woman wrings her hands in anguish.

At the far right a servant exits the scene through an open doorway. This figure, turned in sharp contrapposto adds to the naturalism and animation of the proceedings.

The figures are presented as though on a stage with the forward edge of the floor deliberately exposed. Poussin's use of classical prototypes includes the coffered ceiling and a tripod table with each leg imitating that of a mythical beast, such as a lion or griffin. Poussin's careful study of Roman attire is reflected in the classicising style of the robes and gowns. Circular motifs, such as the one on the rear wall, are commonly found on Roman funerary stelae or stone slabs, symbolising eternity and the cycle of life and death.

Poussin creates a rhythm across the painting through interlinked gestures of hands, arms and feet, inspired in part by his knowledge of classical bas-reliefs. For this painting he drew inspiration from a group of sarcophagi in the Villa Albani, in Rome, representing the Death of Meleager, later engraved in 1645 by the French painter, François Perrier.

## CONDITION OF THE PAINTING

The painting is on a twill canvas, thickly primed with a red-brown coating which gives an almost smooth finish to an otherwise rather rough canvas, which can be seen on the well-preserved tacking edge on the reverse of the painting. It appears to have an old lining, which is noticeably sympathetic to the painted surface. The varnish is thinly applied and very little discoloured. The painting was cleaned prior to the exhibition, Poussin sacraments and Bacchanals, held at the National Gallery of Scotland in 1981.

## POINTS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

What does historical painting have to offer contemporary art and artists?

How does the subject of this painting compare to other end of life traditions?

What is the role of colour in this painting?