



POUSSIN AND THE DANCE

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FRANCESCA WHITLUM-COOPER

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INVITATION TO THE DANCE POUSSIN IN ROME

EMILY A. BEENY

Nicolas Poussin is remembered today as the father of French classicism, a *serious* painter—more revered, perhaps, than loved—whose learning and stoic self-restraint furnished a model for generations of artists from Charles Le Brun to Henri Matisse. The pictures Poussin painted in his later years (the mid-1640s to 1660s) can seem stern and remote: all frozen gesture and philosophy lessons. But the works he produced during his early Roman career—in the 1620s and 1630s—are full of “wine and blood”: the impulses and appetites of a man still in the process of becoming.¹ Here amid drunken revelry, sexual abandon, violence, and passion of every kind, we find scenes of dancing. For in this period, Poussin made a name for himself as a painter of dances, furnishing examples to the king of Spain (plate 16), the first minister of France (plates 17, 18, and 24), and a future pope (plate 33). With these dancing pictures he charted a new course for his art.²

Living and working in Rome, Poussin drew inspiration from antique bas-reliefs, where maenads frolicked in frozen rites (plates 3, 23) and maidens skipped with measured steps (plate 11). Portraying dancers allowed him to work through the problem of arresting motion, to explore the expressive potential of the body, and to devise new methods of composing his pictures. He brought lessons learned from dance to bear on every aspect of his work, famously using wax figurines to stage the scenes he drew and painted. It is no accident that the words “dance” and “ballet” are commonly used to describe Poussin’s *battle* paintings: he approached dramatic action with a choreographer’s eye.³ Nor should it surprise us to learn that several of his earliest collectors back in France were themselves dancers or patrons of the ballet.⁴

From the standpoint of style, Poussin’s dancing pictures employ an increasingly cool, abstract formal language to describe the heated movements they represent. If we compare his earliest dancing picture, *Bacchus and Ariadne* (plate 1), painted around 1626, to one of his last, *The Triumph of Bacchus* (plate 18), painted a decade later, we observe that his dancers look less and less like flesh and blood, more and more like stone. Visible brushstrokes give way to crisp contour as rowdy figures snap

Nicolas Poussin
THE REALM OF FLORA

1630–31

Oil on canvas

131 x 181 cm (51 $\frac{5}{8}$ x 71 $\frac{1}{4}$ in.)

Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister,
Staatliche Kunstsammlungen, inv. 719



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Roman
**RELIEF OF FIVE
DANCERS BEFORE
A PORTICO, KNOWN
AS THE BORGHESE
DANCERS**

Second century CE
Marble
72 x 187 x 14 cm (28¼ x 73⅝ x 5½ in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département
des Antiquités Grecques, Étrusques et
Romaines, inv. MA 1612



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Nicolas Poussin
**DANCE BEFORE A
HERM OF PAN**

ca. 1628–30
Pen and brown ink and brush and brown
wash over traces of graphite on paper
20.6 x 32.7 cm (8⅛ x 12⅞ in.)
Windsor, Royal Collection/HM Queen
Elizabeth II, inv. RCIN 911979



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Nicolas Poussin
**A BACCHANALIAN
REVEL BEFORE A
TERM**

ca. 1632–33
Oil on canvas
98 × 142.8 cm (38⁵/₈ × 56¹/₄ in.)
London, National Gallery, Bought, 1826,
inv. NG62



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Nicolas Poussin
**BACCHANAL
AROUND A HERM**

ca. 1635–36
Brush and brown wash over black chalk
on paper
18.1 × 25.9 cm (7¹/₈ × 10¹/₄ in.)
Paris, Musée du Louvre, Département
des Arts Graphiques, inv. MI 1103





DANCES FOR RICHELIEU

FRANCESCA WHITLUM-COOPER

On May 19, 1636, the Marchese Pompeo Frangipani wrote to Cardinal Richelieu (Armand-Jean du Plessis, duc de Richelieu, 1585–1642), first minister of France and, after the king, the most powerful man in the country, to say that the new bishop of Albi had departed from Rome, carrying with him “two paintings of Bacchanals that the painter [Nicolas] Poussin has already executed according to your desire and intention.”¹ These two bacchanals have long been identified as *The Triumph of Pan* (plate 17) and *The Triumph of Bacchus* (plate 18), painted for the château de Richelieu, the cardinal’s newly built palace, about two hundred miles southwest of Paris.

In the first, a tightly knit group of nymphs and revelers cavorts around a horned golden statue: this is most commonly believed to be Pan, god of woodlands and shepherds and follower of Bacchus, the god of wine, although we shall see that this identification is not entirely straightforward. Theatrical masks alluding to Bacchus’s role as protector of theaters and ivy-wrapped staves carried in his rituals lie strewn in the foreground, as the statue is garlanded with flowers and a deer is carried off for sacrifice. This is a wild, even debauched moment, as exuberant dance, loud music, and strong wine cause the revelers to lurch, stumble, and throw back their heads in ecstasy.

The second triumph depicts Bacchus himself in an ornate chariot drawn by centaurs. His entourage of satyrs, maenads, and mythological characters is accompanied by trumpets, tambourines, and panpipes. A river god gazes up at the procession as the chariot of the sun god Apollo wheels through the golden sky. The subjects of these canvases, with their half-naked, drunken figures, might seem at first unusual choices for such a prominent figure of church and state as Richelieu. Yet, these bacchanals are among the most rigorously composed canvases of Poussin’s career, bursting with allusions to classical antiquity. In these paintings, he makes drunkenness not only elegant but also erudite.

Almost a dozen drawings for *The Triumph of Pan* survive, more than for any other composition by Poussin. There is no firm consensus on how precisely these drawings follow one another—Anthony Blunt, the twentieth-century authority on Poussin,

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Nicolas Poussin

THE TRIUMPH OF PAN

1636

Oil on canvas

135.9 x 146 cm (53½ x 57½ in.)

London, National Gallery, Bought with contributions from the National Heritage Fund and the Art Fund, 1982, inv. NG6477



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Nicolas Poussin

THE TRIUMPH OF BACCHUS

1635-36

Oil on canvas

128 x 151.8 cm (50¾ x 59¾ in.)

Kansas City, The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, inv. 31-94

