

# Two Great Frenchmen in Seventeenth-century Rome

David Carrier

Sheila McTighe, *Representing from Life in Seventeenth-century Italy*. Amsterdam University Press, 256pp., 89 b/w plates, \$144 cloth.

Richard Verdi, *Poussin as a Painter. From Classicism to Abstraction*. Reaktion Books, 368pp., 223 color, 18 b/w illustrations, \$50 cloth.

**A**BOVE MY DESK IS A CHEAP nineteenth-century print of a painting by Jean-Baptiste Leloir, *Claude Lorraine, Nicolas Poussin and Gaspar Poussin in the Roman Campagna* (Figure 1). Claude is preparing to make a drawing, advised by Poussin, who married the sister of Gaspar Poussin, the third figure here who stands at the side. Such genre fantasies were popular at that time. They played a significant role in the process by which these two French-born men who worked in Rome became identified as *French* painters. We know a great deal about the practice of later French artists. There are, for example, photographs of Paul Cézanne and Camille Pissarro in the countryside preparing to paint together. Knowing that they worked from life, we can contrast their landscapes,

and compare them to early photographs of those scenes. We take for granted that modernists often worked from life in this way. But how, from the much more limited evidence available, can we reconstruct earlier studio practices in a way that illuminates our experience of Italian art?

In the seventeenth century, the most important and prestigious Italian commissions typically were for large sacred works. But just as small mammals lived already in the age of the dinosaurs, so there was then in Italy already a real interest in landscapes and still life paintings, two often inherently naturalistic genres that became of central importance under modernism. Also, if you look at the religious works, you usually find contemporary urban or country scenes in the background. And often the saints and martyrs appear to be painted from models. This much is obvious. But painting with immediate reference to lived experience seems to have been of minor importance for most major artists. The interest of Sheila McTighe's remarkable book lies, then, in the way that she develops an original, highly suggestive analysis, indicating in a precise way how some artists in Italy painted from life.



Figure 1 Claude Lorraine, Nicolas Poussin and Gaspar Poussin in the Roman Campagna. Nineteenth-century engraving after a painting by Jean-Baptiste Leloir.

*Representing from Life* has a long methodological introduction; a chapter on Caravaggio; two chapters on the great printmaker Jacques Callot; one on Claude Lorraine and another on images of the Neapolitan Revolt of Masaniello, which took place in 1647. In different ways, it argues, all of these otherwise varied artists represented from life. This, its important central claim, is best understood by analogy to some accounts from literature. Just as some writing underlines the presence of the author, the creator of the text, whilst other writing pretends to be impersonal, effacing the role of its writer; so, analogously, some

pictures emphasize the creative role of the artist, but others appear to be, as it were, impersonally created, written without reference to the author's presence. Thus a visual image may imply, "this is how the world appears, apart from being viewed" or, rather, it may suggest, "this is what I saw," as if the artist had included evidence of his presence in the visual image.

Sometimes, McTighe argues, the visual artist pretends to be present to what he depicts as a way of guaranteeing the truthfulness of his image. (I write "he" because all of the examples here are male). Here are some examples. Artists who seek

to underline their presence may show in reflections images of themselves or their studio. (Caravaggio adopted this procedure in some early works.) They can use verbal inscriptions asserting their presence (Roelant Savery, a Flemish artist, did this.). And they can depict themselves making the image within the image (Callot and Claude made such images). The gap “between observation and memory,” McTighe nicely says in her introduction, is the gap in which “representation takes place.”

But once we allow, as she clearly tells us, that Caravaggio sometimes emulated past art; and, once she explains, in the case of Michelangelo Cerquozzi’s depiction of Masaniello, that “the painter worked *dal vivo*, but he was not there to see the scene. He was absent, but has made us present [ ... ],” what does this account of representing from life come to? To speak of “absent witnessing” seems a contradiction in terms. And once this is allowed, the much-repeated phrase “from life,” or the various synonyms cited by McTighe, threatens to lose all meaning. If it doesn’t identify an image made by the artist while viewing the subject, then what can it mean?

Here, I believe, the parallels between the procedures of literary critics and those described in McTighe’s account are suggestive. Truthfulness in narrative description can be an illusion, like its equivalent in a visual image. It is, still, an illusion that matters, in visual art as in prose, because it underlines the reality of the representation. There are several ways that visual artists can achieve this result. In some early Caravaggios we see reflections showing “human figures who gaze out of the image into our space.” (In the 1980s the painter David Reed drew my attention to some of these effects, which are not visible in the small murky plates in this book). In her account of Claude’s *Siege of La Rochelle*, McTighe speaks of “the artist’s fictional

presence and literal absence,” citing an upside-down signature in the sheet held by a draftsman shown at work. And in some other Claudes we find images of a draftsman “whose presence declares ‘I am transforming my looking into a making of the view.’”

What this naturalistic illusion would require, if I understand McTighe’s account, is that in the picture we see not only the representation of its subject, but also the artist’s activity of making that representation. How is that possible? Surely the artist must be outside the picture he creates! Here perhaps a modernist example would suggest how such an image would function. In the 1920s, Henri Matisse painted his odalisques in strikingly self-sufficient pictures, showing himself at work depicting the very model we view. And, more dramatically, in a number of drawings, he showed the *mise-en-abyme*, the infinite regress in which we see the image (of an artist making an image (of an artist . . .)). Usually naturalism in seventeenth-century art is contrasted to the depiction of idealized figures, as when Caravaggio’s peasants with bare, muddy feet are juxtaposed with Poussin’s perfect High Renaissance figures. But that’s not McTighe’s concern when she links it with painting *dal vivo*. She, rather, is interested in the way that the pictures of interest show immediate evidence of their own production, as in Matisse’s *mise-en-abymes*. As she rightly notes, the effect she describes is a fascinating form of visual illusionism. Normally a figurative image merely presents its subject. In the cases she presents, it’s as if the artist has added a promissory note, in effect saying: this is a truthful image that I have made.

There are some minor problems in McTighe’s exposition. Her introduction gets distracted with a too brief critique of Ernst Gombrich’s well known theory of art history as making-and-matching. In

particular, the reference to an essay by Joel Snyder is puzzling because it's not really concerned with a critique of Gombrich. In any case, McTighe doesn't need to take a stand on Gombrich's account in order to develop her own very interesting theory. And the account of Cerquozzi's representation of Masaniello doesn't develop clearly. Here an unhappy editorial glitch leaves incomplete the reference to the fullest recent account, whose plausible claims are not really addressed.<sup>1</sup> Finally, although there are repeated suggestions that McTighe's analysis relates to Svetlana Alpers's famous discussion of Dutch art, that interesting claim never becomes clear.

These are minor problems in an exciting, pathbreaking book. What's very daring about *Representing from Life* is that it applies to seventeenth-century Italian art a way of thinking usually used only with reference to literary modernism. That, needless to say, doesn't show that all of its claims are true. Further investigation is called for. But since seicento-studies are in real need of innovative thinking, the stimulus provided by her account should be welcomed. McTighe repeatedly suggests that her analysis links these representations from life to a history of patronage, a tantalizing suggestion that deserves more study.

**N**icolas Poussin (1594-1665) had a highly unusual career. Born in Northern France, he emigrated in his twenties to Rome, the center of the art world. And after some early, not entirely successful attempts to produce public works, he then, thanks to his artful cultivation of French bourgeois patrons, pursued a career essentially outside of the

Roman scene. His chosen subjects were drawn from Greco-Roman history and Scripture, apart from two portraits made to please supporters. His extensive correspondence reveals his thinking and, also, his success at marketing his art. Compared with his peers in Rome, he was remarkably good at going his own way.

The founding father of the French tradition, much admired by connoisseurs and some modernist artists, Poussin is an old master who doesn't engage the larger public, unlike his *bête noir*, Caravaggio. He was fortunate to attract two very different twentieth-century scholars: Anthony Blunt, who published an elaborate account of his intellectual background, and Denis Mahon, whose reconstruction of his development is unsurpassed. And thanks to the championship of Pierre Rosenberg, longtime director of the Louvre, who identifies him, along with Paul Cézanne, as the greatest French painter, a great Paris exhibition was organized in 1994, the 400th anniversary of his birth.

*Poussin as a Painter* is a masterpiece, a sustained and extremely lucid commentary. Verdi's close attention to detail, his magisterial discussion of color, composition and Poussin's reworkings of his themes make this by miles the best such account that I know. One senses that his love for this strange artist has been a lifelong, fruitful inspiration.

Almost a century ago, Roger Fry praised Poussin the formalist, while admitting that his pictorial content was banal, even boring. Rejecting that approach, in 1958 Blunt contrasted the account he provided of Poussin's intellectual climate with discussion of "Poussin as a painter [ ... ]," describing a study he hoped but failed to write. Endorsing this basic dualism, Verdi now provides such a book, exploring the "visual aims and attractions" of Poussin's art. He believes that we can best appreciate

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher Marshall's "'Causa di Stravaganze': Order and Anarchy in Domenico Gargiulo's *Revolt of Masaniello*," *Art Bulletin* 80:3 (Sept. 1998), pp. 478-97.



Figure 2 Nicolas Poussin, *Blind Orion Searching for the Rising Sun*, 1658. Oil on canvas, 46 7/8 x 72 in. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Public Domain / Open Access

these artworks without discussing their “intellectual and philosophical background” But, this account is very different from the extended discussion of Poussin’s colleague Giovanni Bellori, who sought to inspire historicist reflection. Why is Verdi’s whole approach so different from that of an intelligent writer who knew the artist?

In my judgment, distinguishing between discussion of Poussin as a painter and accounts of his intellectual background imports into the seventeenth-century a limiting modernist aesthetic. What we learn from “close study of the pictures themselves” depends upon what knowledge we bring to them. Consider one test case, *Landscape with Orion* (1658; Figure 2). The story is about the giant Orion, blinded for

attacking the goddess Diana. Verdi says that the “picture may be read as an allegory of the circulation of water in nature” What he fails to discuss, however, is the inherently paradoxical nature of a picture about blindness. Poussin shows dark clouds around Orion, whose outstretched left hand is juxtaposed from our viewpoint with the seashore, towards which he walks, guided by the man on his shoulder, to regain his sight. Surely an artist who neglected nothing intended this detail.

Poussin, Verdi says, “sought constantly to discover in such ancient tales a key to the mysteries of the universe and to the order and balance of nature.” In his last painting, *Apollo and Daphne* (1664), Apollo looks with unrequited longing at Daphne.



Verdi describes this “view of existence” as derived from Heraclitus, “who regarded the harmony of the universe as created by the tensions between opposing forces.” But he doesn’t discuss the odd composition of this scene about erotic desire in which Apollo on the far left glances at Daphne, far right, who is indifferent to him. Although he notes earlier that Poussin’s pictures “usually centre on a love without hope,” he doesn’t pursue the visually important implications of this pregnant conception.

The problems with Verdi’s methodology become clearest in the conclusion, when he traces Poussin’s influence on modernism. Presenting an anecdotal nineteenth-century watercolor, *Poussin on the Banks of the Tiber Finding the Composition of his ‘Finding of Moses*, he says: “[n]ature had already provided the raw material.” But surely this is a composition modeled *from* Poussin’s famous painting. And when he writes, “One of Poussin’s great innovations—to make every element in his pictures active and equal *on an abstract level*—has resurfaced at the onset of modern art,” this genealogy for what’s usually called ‘all-overness’ isn’t plausible. Poussin’s pictures, Verdi says, are “far from being objects of luxury,” a claim that would surprise his many grand collectors, who identified luxury with restraint. You cannot really understand his place in the seicento without saying something more about patronage.

Since Blunt’s day, Paul Barolsky, Oskar Bätschmann, Malcolm Bull, T. J. Clark, Elizabeth Cropper and Charles Dempsey,

David Freedberg, Tony Green, Ann Sutherland Harris, Sheila McTighe, Louis Marin, Todd Olson, Jonathan Unglaub, and Richard Wollheim have all written about Poussin, as have I. And the 2015 Louvre exhibition had a massive catalogue. Thus there has been serious revisionist commentary. Some of these writers are in Verdi’s bibliography, but their claims do not enter the text. Just as Poussin resolutely set himself apart from the contemporary Roman world, so Verdi offers an extraordinarily self-sufficient narrative in which his hero develops almost entirely upon his own terms. You couldn’t write a book like this about any other major baroque figure. If it is at all plausible, then Poussin-scholarship is effectively a closed subject. But while I agree that this attitude well adapted to Verdi’s subject, I am not convinced that it’s ultimately satisfactory.

This very beautiful book is as perfect, within its self-imposed terms, as the artist it presents. But it’s not the whole story. Poussin is a great artist who is closely tied to his own time and place. His pictorial subjects and his visual sources all come from a now distant visual and intellectual culture. An easel painter in baroque Rome, he defined himself in part by opposition to that world. You can appreciate Chinese landscapes even if you can’t read the inscriptions. But if you don’t have a classical education, then many of Poussin’s themes will seem bookish, and his achievement will be impossible to adequately understand. **A**