

Poussin's 'Triumph of Silenus' rediscovered

The recent cleaning and technical analysis of Poussin's 'Triumph of Silenus' in the National Gallery, London, has revealed that the canvas, long believed to be a copy, is in fact the original work, painted for Cardinal Richelieu c.1636.

by FRANCESCA WHITLUM-COOPER

THE NATIONAL GALLERY, LONDON, is home to one of the world's greatest collections of paintings by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665), so it is no small irony that the first of these works to enter its collection has long been plagued by questions of authenticity. The *Triumph of Silenus* (Fig.2) was purchased for the nation in 1824 as part of the Angerstein Collection, the group of thirty-eight paintings belonging to John Julius Angerstein (1735–1823) that both prompted the foundation and formed the nucleus of the English national collection. Then 'firmly attributed' to Poussin,¹ over the subsequent centuries its status has

become progressively less certain. Since at least 1946 it has been classified as a copy,² and attributions to Pierre Dulin (1669–1748) and Pierre Lemaire (1612–88), now disregarded, have been suggested.³ However, almost two hundred years after its purchase for the nation, conservation treatment and technical study carried out at the National Gallery in 2019–20 have cast this painting and its attribution in a new light. If, as the evidence suggests, the *Triumph of Silenus* is indeed autograph – one of three pictures commissioned from the artist by Cardinal Richelieu in the mid-1630s – what questions does this raise about the circumstances of its execution, its much-discussed commission and perceptions of Poussin more broadly?

It is known for certain that the painting's composition is that of a picture commissioned from Poussin by Richelieu thanks to three eighteenth-century copies, all in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours.⁴ The *Triumph of Silenus* formed part of a highly prestigious project consisting of three bacchanals painted by Poussin for the Cabinet du Roi at the château de Richelieu, the chief minister's vast, newly completed residence in Touraine.⁵ The earliest detailed description of the château, written by its governor, Benjamin Vignier, in the 1660s or 1670s,⁶ records three paintings by Poussin in the Cabinet du Roi: '*un Triomphe de BACCHUS*' (Fig.1), '*une BACCHANALE*', clearly identifiable as the *Triumph of Pan* (Fig.3) and '*un*

1. *The Triumph of Bacchus*, by Nicolas Poussin. 1635–36. Oil on canvas, 127.97 by 151.77 cm. (Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City).

Opposite

2. *The Triumph of Silenus*, by Nicolas Poussin, photographed in 2020 after cleaning in 2019–20. 1635–36. Oil on canvas, 142.9 by 120.5 cm. (National Gallery, London.)



I owe a debt of gratitude to several Poussin scholars for their thoughts on this reattribution, most especially Emily Beeny, Hugh Brigstocke and Pierre Rosenberg. For their help in the preparation of this article, I would like to thank Lucy Chiswell, Marika Spring, Hayley Tomlinson and Letizia Treves. I am extremely grateful to my colleagues in the Scientific Department at the National Gallery, London, for sharing their research and expertise with me, especially Rachel Billinge, Catherine Higgitt, Marika Spring and Joanna Russell. It is intended that a full account of their technical findings relating to the paintings by Poussin discussed in this article will be published in *The National Gallery Technical Bulletin* in 2022.

1. H. Wine: *National Gallery Catalogues: The Seventeenth-Century French Paintings*, London 2001, p.xviii.

2. M. Davies: *National Gallery Catalogues: French School*, London 1946, p.40.

3. For the attribution to Dulin, see Davies, *op. cit.* (note 2), p.40. For Denis Mahon's suggestion of Lemaire, see Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.383, note 43.

4. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Tours, inv. nos.795.1.2; 795.1.3; and 7956.1.4.

5. For a comprehensive account of the château and its environs, see S. Alsteens et. al., eds: exh. cat. *Richelieu à Richelieu: architecture et décors d'un château disparu*, Orléans and Tours (Musée des Beaux-Arts) 2011.

6. See Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.364, note 65.



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banquet de SILENE?⁷ These, as has been discussed at length elsewhere, were hung in the Cabinet alongside works that had formerly been in the studiolo of Isabella d'Este (1474–1539) in the Ducal Palace in Mantua – Andrea Mantegna's *Minerva expelling the vices from the garden of virtue* and *Parnassus*, Lorenzo Costa's *Allegory of the court of Isabella d'Este*, Pietro Perugino's *Combat of Love and Chastity* and Mantegna's and Costa's *Reign of Comus* (all Musée du Louvre, Paris). The paintings must have formed a dazzling

7 B. Vignier: *Le Chasteau de Richelieu ou l'histoire des héros de l'antiquité avec des réflexions morales par M. Vignier*, Saumur 1676, pp.62 (Silenus) and 63 (Bacchus and Pan).

8 *Ibid.*, pp.61–68. For more recent

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.61–68. For more recent

literature on Poussin's paintings in the Cabinet, see D. Bastet: 'Étude iconographique des "Bacchanales Richelieu" de Nicolas Poussin', *Studio: Revue d'histoire de l'art de l'Académie de France à Rome* 4 (2006), pp.167-86; and

visual display in the ten by twelve metre room, which was also decorated with sculpted caryatids and paintings of marine battles.⁸ The three works by Poussin were removed from the château during the early part of the eighteenth century, when they were replaced by the copies now in Tours.

S. Pierguidi: 'Confronto e simmetria: dai dipinti degli studioli di Isabella e Alfonso d'Este ai pendants di Nicolas Poussin', *Civiltà Mantovana* 3 (2011), pp.54-86.
9 See Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.350. Research and commentary on the

Triumph of Bacchus is due to be published in 2021 as part of the Nelson-Atkins's online catalogue, <https://nelson-atkins.org/fpc/seventeenth-century-1600-1699/210/>, accessed 30th March 2021.

4. *The Triumph of Silenus*, by Nicolas Poussin, photographed before its cleaning in 2019–20. 1635–36. Oil on canvas, 142.9 by 120.5 cm. (National Gallery, London.)

5. Detail of Fig.2, showing Silenus.

The subsequent histories of the *Triumph of Pan* and the *Triumph of Bacchus* are well-documented. Both paintings were in the collection of Samuel Paris in London by 1741, and they remained together in the Delmé and Ashburnham collections until 1850.⁹ The *Triumph of Bacchus* was bought by the Nelson-Atkins Museum from the Howard collection at Castle Howard, Yorkshire, in 1931 and the *Triumph of Pan* was acquired by the National Gallery from the Morrison collection in 1982. Little, however, is known about what happened to the *Triumph of Silenus* after it was removed from the château de Richelieu. In addition to the Tours copy, several versions of the composition are known,¹⁰ although the consensus has always been that the National Gallery version is the best.¹¹ The earliest certain provenance of the Gallery's *Silens* (hereafter referred to by its inventory number, NG42, to avoid confusion) dates from the beginning of the nineteenth century. It was in the sale of John Purling of 68 Portland Place, London, in February 1801, and subsequently in the March 1803 sale of Richard Walker of Liverpool, where it was purchased by Angerstein.¹² It was treated as autograph in National Gallery publications until as late as 1929.¹³ Doubt crept in with the publication in 1946 of the first edition of Martin Davies's catalogue of the National Gallery's French paintings, which attributed the picture to Pierre Dulin (1669–1748). The second edition of 1957 settled upon 'After Nicolas Poussin (?).'¹⁴ Since the publication of Humphrey Wine's catalogue in 2001 the painting has been catalogued as 'After Poussin'.¹⁵

The composition of the *Triumph of Silenus* depicts a bacchanalian revel in a wooded glade beneath a stand of spindly trees. At the left, the drunken figure of Silenus lurches into the composition, half carried by attendants, half astride a tiger. Although Ovid describes Silenus as riding an ass,¹⁶ the tiger here is presumably an allusion to Bacchus's triumphs in India, something emphasised in the broader context of the Cabinet du Roi by the *Triumph of Bacchus*.¹⁷ At the centre, two revellers dance and make music as a kneeling satyr drinks deeply from a cup of wine. A companion behind him, having over-imbibed, sprawls sleeping on a blue cloth. At the right, a female satyr rides a goat and two centaurs punish an amorous donkey, branding its head with a torch.

It is not difficult to see where some of the uncertainty around NG42 has arisen, especially when looking at photographs taken before its recent cleaning (Fig.4). Unlike the triumphs of Pan and Bacchus, which enjoy a high level of finish across their tightly choreographed canvases, both the composition of NG42 and its physical make-up in paint can feel a little bare. The foreground offers fewer of the delightful still-life elements that populate the *Triumph of Pan*, and those that have been included, such as the bell and the staff, feel rather plain by comparison. Although there are areas of exquisite detail – in the individual pine needles crowning the head of the kneeling satyr at centre, for example – the tiger, donkey and parts of the figures' musculature are notably underworked (Fig.5). Davies remained firm in his belief that 'it would be very desirable to withdraw so problematical a picture as No. 42 from Poussin altogether'.¹⁸

¹¹ R. Verdi: exh. cat. *Nicolas Poussin 1594–1665*, London (Royal Academy of Arts) 1995, p.202, no.29.

¹² See Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.376.

¹³ National Gallery, Trafalgar Square: Catalogue, London 1929, p.288.

¹⁴ M. Davies: *National Gallery Catalogues: French School*, London 1957, p.187.

¹⁵ Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.376.

¹⁶ Ovid: *Fasti*, 1:399.

¹⁷ Bastet, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.175–77.

¹⁸ Davies, *op. cit.* (note 14), p.189.



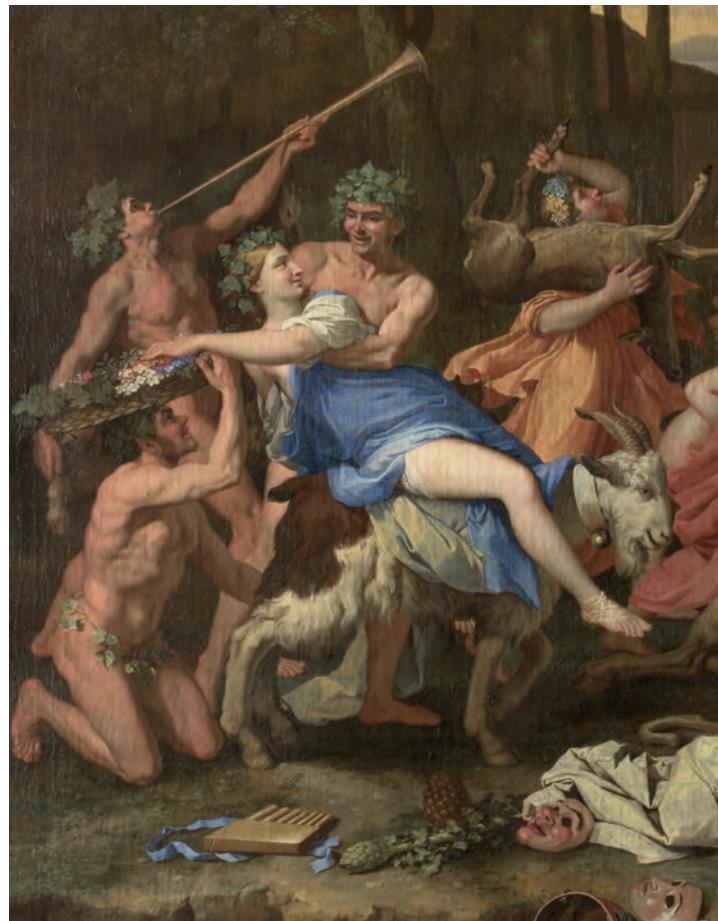
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Davies was not alone in his discomfort with NG42: the picture enjoys the dubious honour of having been rejected by many, although not all, of the twentieth-century's Poussin specialists on account of both perceived quality and compositional weakness. Anthony Blunt thought Davies's arguments 'almost certainly justified', being particularly disturbed by the 'curiously blank and meaningless areas at the top and bottom of the composition'.¹⁹ Jacques Thuillier regarded it as a 'good old copy',²⁰ a view echoed by Richard Verdi, who described the picture as the finest of the known copies.²¹ Denis Mahon is said to have rejected the painting in conversation, while Humphrey Wine judged that 'the quality of the painting, particularly in relation to the *Triumph of Pan*, [spoke] against its authenticity'.²² Following the exhibition *Poussin: Sacraments and Bacchanals* at the National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh, in 1981, which reunited the triumphs of Pan and Bacchus with NG42 for the first time, Hugh Brigstocke likewise noted the picture's lack of quality, 'not only in execution but in design', although he inclined towards believing NG42 to be autograph when he saw it during its recent cleaning.²³ Pierre Rosenberg has long believed the picture to be by Poussin, despite its 'disastrous state of conservation'.²⁴

Part of the problem, evidently, has been how to reconcile the high (if somewhat hard) degree of finish of the *Pan* and the *Bacchus* with that of the *Sileneus*. Yet recent conservation treatment has shown the *Sileneus* to be far closer to the *Pan* than previously thought. Without the distorting effects of discoloured varnish, the palette is bright and the once-dull draperies, particularly those on the right of the picture, now bear a far

6. Detail of Fig.3, showing a woman astride a goat.

7. Detail of Fig.1, showing a satyr astride a goat.



stronger resemblance to those in the *Pan*. The most fully worked up figures, such as the kneeling satyr at centre or the female satyr at right, withstand comparison with their counterparts in the *Pan*. Whether in the ribbed texture of the goats' horns, the delightfully shaggy fur, or the flowing blue ribbon that finds a place in each composition (Figs.6 and 7), we can see obvious parallels between the painting of at least parts of the two pictures. Furthermore, there are no signs of widespread abrasion or damage to the *Sileneus*, nor of any elements being removed from the foreground.

In addition to those *pentimenti* visible to the naked eye – such as that of the left knee of the man pouring wine – infra-red reflectography and X-ray fluorescence (XRF) scanning have revealed further changes made during painting, undermining the argument that NG42 is a copy of an existing work. These changes range from the raising of the skyline at the left to the continuation of the line of the goat's back beneath the yellow drapery, which was added later in the painting process. Comparison of the pigments used in both the *Pan* and *Sileneus* shows extremely similar, even idiosyncratic, mixtures and components, which would be difficult to explain across two unconnected paintings. One example is a sodium-containing alumino-silicate found in the composition of the earth pigment or pigments in the red-brown preparatory layer of both paintings, which is relatively uncommon in earth pigments in paintings. These findings, together with the discovery published in 2013 that all three paintings are on canvas cut from the same bolt, argue strongly that NG42 was produced in the same workshop as the other Triumphs, thus removing the possibility that it was a copy made by a French artist once the original had arrived in France.²⁵ Following the 1981 Edinburgh exhibition, Brigstocke lamented the near universal insistence on the myth





8. *The nurture of Jupiter*, by Nicolas Poussin. c.1636–37. Oil on canvas, 96.5 by 121 cm. (Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

that Poussin always worked alone, since such a view precluded studio assistance and necessitated seeing NG42 as a copy.²⁶ The recent cleaning and technical study suggests, however, that NG42 is indeed Poussin's original *Triumph of Silenus*, albeit a less polished original than we might traditionally expect of the artist.

How, then, to explain this apparent disparity in quality between the *Triumph of Silenus* and the other two triumphs painted for Richelieu?

19 A. Blunt: *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin: A Critical Catalogue*, London 1966, II, p.99, no.138.

20 'bonne copie ancienne', J. Thuillier: *Nicolas Poussin*, Paris 1994, p.254, no.111.

21 Verdi, *op. cit.* (note 11), p.202.

22 See Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.383, note 40, and p.380.

23 H. Brigstocke: 'Poussin in Edinburgh', THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE 124 (1982), pp.239–40, at p.240, and in conversation with

the author, March 2020.

24 'ruiné mais, à nos yeux, original', P. Rosenberg: exh. cat. *Nicolas Poussin: 1594–1665*, Paris (Galeries nationales du Grand Palais) 1994–95, p.226.

25 See R.G. Erdmann et al.: 'Reuniting Poussin's Bacchanals painted for Cardinal Richelieu through quantitative weave analysis', *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 52 (2013), pp.1–21; and M. Schafer and J. Twilley: 'Nicolas Poussin, "The Triumph of Bacchus", 1635–36', in A.M. DeGalan,

Firstly, it is necessary to return to the known details of the commission. The waters are muddled here by the early accounts of Poussin's career by G.P. Bellori, André Félibien and G.B. Passeri, according to whom Poussin painted four bacchanals for Cardinal Richelieu, although descriptions of the Cabinet du Roi make clear that there were only ever three.²⁷ More informative is the letter sent on 19th May 1636 from the Marchese Pompeo Frangipani to Cardinal Richelieu noting that the new bishop of Albi had departed from Rome, carrying with him 'two paintings of Bacchanals, which the painter Poussin has already delivered according to your wishes and intention'.²⁸

ed.: *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, Kansas City, MO (and see note 9 above).

26 Brigstocke, *op. cit.* (note 23), p.240.

27 G.P. Bellori: *Le Vite dei Pittori, Scultori et Architetti Moderni*, Rome 1672, p.423; A. Félibien: *Entretiens sur les vies et sur les ouvrages des plus excellens peintres anciens et modernes* [1685], Paris 1725, VI, p.27; and G.B. Passeri: *Vite de' pittori, scultori, ed architetti, che anno lavorato in Roma,*

morti dal 1641 fino al 1673, Rome 1772, p.353. The fullest early account of the château is that of Vignier, *op. cit.* (note 7), pp.61–68; for other accounts, see Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.358.

28 'due quadri dè Baccanali, che il Poesino Pittore ha già forniti conforme al desiderio, et intentione di lei', quoted in R. Pintard: 'Rencontres avec Poussin', in A. Chastel, ed.: *Nicolas Poussin: Actes du colloque international, Paris, 19–21 septembre 1958*, Paris 1960, I, p.33 note 7.

These two bacchanals have long been assumed to be the triumphs of Pan and Bacchus, both on account of their obvious relationship as pendants and because early descriptions of the Cabinet place them side-by-side on the same wall.²⁹ The *Sileneus*, by contrast, hung 'on the opposite wall, facing' the other two ('Dans l'autreface, vis-à-vis'), between Mantegna's *Parnassus* and Costa's *Allegory of the Court of Isabella d'Este*.³⁰ No archival source has yet proved that Poussin's pictures were explicitly commissioned to hang alongside those from the *studiolo*, which had arrived at Richelieu in the summer of 1632.³¹ Nevertheless, the *Sileneus*'s unusual format and its divergence from the dimensions of the *Pan* and *Bacchus* argue that it was never intended to hang directly alongside them. Rather, it seems to have been intended to sit within the wider group of pictures in the Cabinet, which, as Delphine Bastet has pointed out, all share Dionysian themes as well as certain formal similarities.³² Are the rocky outcrops of the *Sileneus*, for example, intended to relate to those of the neighbouring *Parnassus*, the stands of trees to those in Costa's *Allegory*? Although the relationship of the *Triumph of Silenus* to the paintings by Mantegna and Costa must, for now, remain conjecture, the Frangipani letter confirms that it was at the very least delivered separately from the first two Triumphs. Never intended to look like the third in a series, it may well have been commissioned separately too.

A second fact to consider is that the mid- to late 1630s were extremely busy years for Poussin. This was the period in which he was working on his contributions to Philip IV's ruinously expensive pleasure palace of the Buen Retiro, Madrid. This commission included not only the *Landscape with St Paul the Hermit* (Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid) but also the vast canvases of *The hunt of Meleager* (Prado) and *Hymenaeus disguised as a woman during an offering to Priapus* (Museu de Arte, Assis Châteaubriand, São Paulo), each of which is almost four metres wide and which are generally dated to 1634–38.³³ As well as being the most prestigious commission of Poussin's career to date, the three Spanish pictures likewise formed the largest body of work in terms of sheer quantity of canvas. This was no trifling project, and indeed it has been suggested that Richelieu's commission of the Triumphs was a direct response to Poussin's work for Philip IV and the Buen Retiro – a way of waging war in paint as well as by force, since the French and Spanish armies were then engaged in the Franco-Spanish War (1635–39).³⁴ Juggling the demands of these embattled patrons and their respective commissions must have put Poussin under no small degree of pressure.

In dating the commission of the Richelieu bacchanals to late 1635, Blunt noted the significance of both patron and project to Poussin at this moment: 'it is inconceivable,' he argued, 'that Poussin, at that stage of his career, would have kept so important a patron as Richelieu waiting longer than was absolutely necessary'.³⁵ With the knowledge now gained from conservation treatment and scientific analysis, Blunt's argument might equally shed light on *Triumph of Silenus*. If Richelieu was, indeed,

too important a patron to be kept waiting, and if, as is known, the demand for the painting fell at an especially busy moment, the *Sileneus* could well have been painted with a lesser degree of finish simply in order to fulfil the commission, perhaps using studio assistance. Although the fact is far from conclusive, it is interesting to note that although more drawings survive for the *Triumph of Pan* than for any other work by Poussin and a handful of sketches (some on the same sheets as those for the *Pan*) are known for the *Triumph of Bacchus*, only one drawing has been closely linked to the composition of the *Sileneus*. Since, as has been widely acknowledged, so much of Poussin's preparation took place before he reached the canvas,³⁶ this may also suggest a more rapid production for the *Triumph of Silenus*.

Thirdly, reattributing NG42 requires a reassessment of our perceptions of Poussin as an artist that not only allows for the possibility – as yet undocumented – that he may have employed more studio assistance than is traditionally thought, but also reconsider the idea of perfection within his work. It has become commonplace to associate the *peintre-philosophe* with extreme carefulness – an almost pedantic, obsessive relationship with finish that can create the feeling that his works are cold or hard with their 'appearance of perfect resolution and finality'.³⁷ Yet we know that this is not always the case, and that Poussin could be uneven, both across his œuvre and within a single painting. The radiant *Nurture of*

9. Detail of Fig.8, showing goats.



²⁹ Vignier, *op. cit.* (note 7), p.63.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.63.

³¹ Letter from Cardinal Richelieu to Henri d'Escoubleau, Cardinal de Sourdis, 24th July 1632, quoted in A. Schnapper: *Collections et collectionneurs dans la France du XVIIe siècle*, Paris 1988–94, II, p.142.

³² Bastet, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.177–78.

³³ For details of the commission and the Buen Retiro more generally, see A. Úbeda, ed.: exh. cat. *El Palacio del Planeta Rey: Felipe IV y el Buen Retiro*, Madrid (Museo Nacional del Prado) 2005; and P. Rosenberg: 'A obra: Hymeneus travestido assistindo a uma dança em honra a Priapo', in P. Curie

et al.: *Poussin: Restauração: Hymeneus travestido assistindo a uma dança em honra a Priapo*, São Paulo 2009, pp.44–63.

³⁴ See O. Bonfait: *Poussin et Louis XIV: peinture et monarchie dans la France du grand siècle*, Paris 2015, p.42.

³⁵ Blunt, *op. cit.* (note 19), II, p.96, nos.136–38.

³⁶ S. McTighe: 'Poussin's practice: a new plea for Poussin as a painter', *Kermes: Arte e Técnica del Restauro* 94/95 (2015), pp.11–15, at p.12.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.11.

³⁸ I am grateful to Peter Kerber for a generous and thought-provoking

Jupiter (c.1636–37) provides a pertinent point of comparison (Fig.8).³⁸ From the complex fall and fold of the nymphs' richly coloured drapery to the knowing expression on the goat Amaltheia's face, the foreground group is exquisitely rendered. The still-life elements of pan pipes and shepherd's crook to the left, however, are cursory in their execution (the crook in the *Sileneus* is indeed rather better). The heads of the goats in the background are even more schematic, barely worked up beyond the level of blocking-in or sketch (Fig.9). As well as providing clear parallels with the animals in the *Sileneus*, this also informs our understanding of the musculature of some of the secondary figures such as the dancing man at the centre of the *Sileneus*, which seems to consist of little more than underlayers, without the further paint layers that would soften the contours of the schematic *ébauches* beneath (Fig.10). Unlike the Dulwich picture, the *Sileneus*'s frieze-like arrangement of figures necessitates – indeed, accentuates – uncomfortable juxtapositions between different levels of finish. The sophistication of the female satyr's face, with its highlights and believable volume, makes that of the shepherd she clings to, blockishly shaded along its nose, feel even more wooden (one might say mask-like, were it not for the refinement of the masks abandoned in the foreground of the *Triumph of Pan*). Yet even with the distinction between foreground and background arguably clearer in the *Nurture of Jupiter* than in the *Triumph of Silenus*, the Dulwich picture

10. Detail of Fig.2, showing dancing figures.



reminds us that Poussin's canvases, particularly at this moment, are far from uniform in their application of paint.

Poussin himself recorded that he worked like this. In his much-quoted letter to Paul Fréart de Chantelou, placing the blame for any perceived inconsistencies within the *Baptism* firmly at his patron's door, he refuses the notion of standardised finish: 'I know how to vary [my style] when I want to'.³⁹ Helen Glanville has argued that the *Sileneus*'s 'lack of "painterly" quality [...] is entirely in keeping with the subject matter'.⁴⁰ One need not go quite so far, it can be argued, in order to suggest that Poussin was capable of sending to Richelieu a painting with varying degrees of finish. It has principally been the *Sileneus*'s perceived lack of quality in comparison to the *Triumph of Pan* that has cast doubt on its authenticity, but it is perhaps more helpful to consider the comparison as one of quantity. In this way, we can understand the differences between the two pictures as resulting from a different application of paint, the *Sileneus*, in many places, not benefiting from as many layers as the *Pan*, nor, correspondingly, from the final level of fine detail. Since NG42 can now confidently be said not to be damaged, and not to be a copy, the physical evidence of the picture itself leads to the conclusion that it has not been brought up to an equal, or indeed even, level of finish.

The plea to consider 'Poussin as a painter' was first issued by Mahon in a celebrated 1965 essay.⁴¹ His call was recently taken up again by Sheila McTighe, who, distancing herself from Mahon's insistence on purely visual evidence, argued for a more nuanced approach to considering both the visual and the intellectual investment in Poussin's process.⁴² In the case of NG42, the phrase can be used to argue for a more pragmatic view of Poussin as an artist: someone who dwelt not only in the philosophical realm, but also in a practical reality of competing projects, demanding patrons and limited time.

It is worth remembering the many positive accounts of the pictures given in the seventeenth century.⁴³ Indeed, the Richelieu commission has often been cast as a trial of sorts, an audition for Poussin's eventual return to Paris. Since he did indeed leave Italy for the French court just a few years later, albeit unwillingly, we must assume that the commission, in all its component parts, was deemed a success. Yet it falls at a strange moment within Poussin's career. The Richelieu pictures are among the last bacchanals Poussin painted, and among the last scenes of such unbridled wildness and ecstasy.⁴⁴ With the first series of the Seven Sacraments, painted in the second half of the 1630s, a new, more sombre Poussin was to emerge, one with little interest in the subject matter he had, in this instance, been contracted to paint. Whether or not the Richelieu bacchanals were, as Blunt is said to have suggested, 'painted without love',⁴⁵ the combination of conservation treatment, scientific analysis and a more practical perspective on the demands on Poussin as a painter at this moment in his career now allows the first work of art by him to enter a national collection in Britain to regain its full attribution.

discussion of this comparison.

³⁹ 'je scais varier quan je veus', letter from Nicolas Poussin to Paul Fréart de Chantelou, 24th March 1647, in C. Jouanny: 'Correspondance de Nicolas Poussin', *Archives de l'art français* 5 (1911), p.352.

⁴⁰ H. Glanville: "'Aspect'" and "Prospect" – Poussin's "Triumph of Silenus", *Artibus et Historiae* 37, no.74 (2016), p.250.

⁴¹ D. Mahon: 'A plea for Poussin as a painter', in G. Kauffmann and W. Sauerländer, eds: *Walter Friedländer zum neunzigsten Geburtstag. Eine Festgabe seiner europäischen Schüler, Freunde und*

Verehrer, Berlin 1965, pp.113–42.

⁴² McTighe, *op. cit.* (note 36). See also R. Verdi: *Poussin as a Painter: From Classicism to Abstraction*, London 2020; reviewed by P. Rosenberg in this Magazine, 162 (2020), pp.904–06.

⁴³ See Wine, *op. cit.* (note 1), pp.378–79.

⁴⁴ Poussin would paint only one more picture of dancing, the lost *Bacchanal before a temple*.

⁴⁵ Letter from Hugh Brigstocke to Gabriele Finaldi recounting Anthony Blunt's visit to the 1981 Edinburgh exhibition, 8th November 2019, National Gallery Archive, dossier NG6477.