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Richard Verdi, *Poussin as a Painter. From Classicism to Abstraction*. London: Reaktion Books, 2020. 366 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1-789141474.

Review by Henry Keazor, Heidelberg University.

Reading the modest “Acknowledgments” at the end of this book, one might think that it is based on a qualification paper somewhat delayed in writing and publication, begun by the author as “postgraduate research on Poussin’s influence after his death prompted by a consuming interest in the history of early modern art” (p. 359). However, the author, Richard Verdi, is a doyen of Poussin scholarship who, since the end of the 1960s, has made important contributions to the reception of the Baroque painter, including that by Paul Cézanne.^[1] In addition, Verdi organized time and again important exhibitions on these as well as other topics, including, in 1995, the British counterpart at London’s Royal Academy to the jubilee exhibition held the year before in Paris on the occasion of Nicolas Poussin’s 400th birthday.^[2] The output of these activities has also been incorporated into the present book.

From 1989 until his retirement, Verdi taught as a professor of fine art at the University of Birmingham, where he was also director of the Barber Institute for Fine Arts from 1990 onwards. In this capacity, he also organized Poussin-related exhibitions there: one example is his 1992 exhibition at the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery on Poussin’s painting *Tancred and Erminia*, a centerpiece of the collection of the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, which is also given due space in the book. Considering that *Poussin as a Painter* returns to themes treated in publications and exhibitions throughout Verdi’s life, the volume also represents a kind of résumé and legacy.

Its title clearly indicates Verdi’s position within the research on Poussin: *Poussin as a Painter* refers to the influential article “A Plea for Poussin as a Painter” by Denis Mahon from 1965. Other Poussin scholars before Verdi have repeatedly engaged with it in an affirmative manner when protesting against what they deem an over-intellectualized reading of Poussin’s works that seem to ignore their painterly quality.^[3] Mahon pleaded for Poussin to be appreciated first and foremost as a painter and not as an ardent reader of a plethora of highly learned texts that he supposedly based his paintings on. Without directly citing Mahon (whose essay—with a misspelt first name as “Dennis”—nevertheless appears in his bibliography), Verdi agrees with the approach of primarily paying attention to the aesthetic feature of the paintings. The author is at the same time also concerned with another matter: according to Verdi’s perception, Poussin was never popular because the problematic view of him as a “peintre philosophe” also shaped the perception of his paintings as “cold,” “frozen,” and “idealized” (p. 6).

In contrast, it is the author's aim to demonstrate to the reader the aesthetically pleasing qualities of Poussin's art, such as on the basis of the painting *Bacchanalian Revel before a Term* (London, National Gallery, ca. 1634) that also decorates the book's sleeve and of the painting's genesis: "...a rich inventiveness, a remarkable purity of drawing and handling and a flawless formal design" (p. 29). And against the reproach of an alleged stiffness of Poussin's figures Verdi states: "Lifelike it may not be, but lifeless it assuredly also is not" (p. 33).

At the same time, Verdi strives to explain why Poussin—despite his unpopularity—was able to become the "father of French painting" (p. 6), an authoritative model not only for French artists such as Paul Cézanne, Edgar Degas, and writer Marcel Proust, but also for British painters such as William Turner. The author's attempt to show that well-ordered beauty is something shared by the art of the early modern period as well as the beginning of modernism is accordingly reflected in the subtitle of the book, "From Classicism to Abstraction." Verdi has structured his book around two aesthetic aspects: color on the one hand, and composition on the other. The central sixth chapter on "Colour and Subject" is framed by the parts "Poussin's Development as a Colourist" (chapter five) and "Colour and Composition" (chapter seven). However, this is preceded by an introductory biographical chapter ("The Artist's Life") and two subsequent parts in which an "Introduction to Poussin's Art" (chapter two) is offered and the parameters of "Invention and Composition" (chapter three), relevant to Poussin are presented.

In addition to the expected information, the biographical chapter also contains some surprising moments. For example, Verdi writes that Poussin's first public commission, the altarpiece with the *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* for St. Peter's (Vatican, Pinacoteca, 1628/29) was "poorly received" (p. 12) and suggests that the artist therefore subsequently specialized entirely in privately commissioned easel paintings. What remains unmentioned is that, following the painting for Saint Peter's, Poussin sought another public commission, a fresco decoration in S. Luigi dei Francesi in Rome, but lost out to another artist and only then turned away from public commissions in Rome. Moreover, the Erasmus painting seems to have been anything but poorly received, for not only does Poussin's colleague and friend at the time, the German painter and biographer Joachim von Sandrart, report in 1675 that the work was valued for the depicted passions, affections, and its invention,^[4] but the composition became the model, only a year after its completion, for artists such as Giacinto Gimigniani and Pietro Testa,^[5] and, a bit later, for Gian Lorenzo Bernini collaborating with the painter Carlo Pellegrini, as can be seen in their painting *The Martyrdom of Saint Mauritius and his Companions* (Vatican, Pinacoteca, ca. 1636/40).

In the parts of the book devoted to color, Verdi argues passionately against the frequently encountered tendency in scholarly literature to see Poussin as quasi-indifferent with regard to color. The artist's early biographer Giovan Pietro Bellori had already tried to defend him against such criticism in 1672 by repeatedly emphasizing the relevance of color for Poussin's works in his descriptions of them. He also contradicted authors like Sandrart when they criticized Poussin for having abandoned the intensive coloring of Titian in his later work and orienting himself, in their view, too much instead on the supposedly "weaker" colors of Raphael.^[6] "Colour is one of the most striking features of Poussin's art" (p. 111) is instead also Verdi's conviction, who at the same time holds the painter himself somewhat responsible for the fact that he is hardly appreciated for his use of color. "For the distinctive colouring of his pictures features nowhere in his written discussions of them," Verdi writes, "which concentrate instead on his overall treatments of a subject and in his skills in invention" (p. 111) and "Poussin may have left us with few words on colour, but he certainly thought deeply about how to deploy it" (p. 159).

Surprisingly though, in his analysis of the function of color in Poussin's paintings, the author does not always describe the paintings accurately. For example, he claims that a green-robed musician in *The Triumph of David* (Dulwich Picture Gallery, ca. 1632) is visible "in the exact centre of the picture" (p. 169), when in fact it is positioned slightly to the left and below the center of the picture. Similarly, Verdi states about Poussin's *Adoration of the Magi* (Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, ca. 1633) that King Balthazar's "pale green" garment would also be "in the exact centre of the picture" (p. 171), but it also sits below and to the left of the painting's center. It might seem pedantic to point this out, but in view of Poussin's precision—which Verdi rightly praises and emphasizes again and again—such inaccuracies are remarkable. The painter was obviously pursuing a goal when shifting the described colors slightly away from the center of the pictures. In the *Triumph of David*, the center of the picture is dominated by the color of the stone architecture that pervades the entire scene. The more vivid colors, green (left), red (right and above) as well as dark (above) and light blue (below), rotate around the center of the scene, and from here their different nuances reach out into the picture space and fill it. In the *Adoration*, on the other hand, the shift of the "pale green" from the center of the picture fulfils the function of contributing to a subtle division of the composition into two parts: at the top, the pictorial space is dominated by the tones of brown and green that characterize the trees, stone, and wood, while underneath, more luminous colors unfold throughout the pictorial space with the clothes of the figures.

Verdi's chapters devoted to the treatment of color are followed by sections in which he first deals with Poussin's "Theory of the Modes," an explanation as to why the painter uses different styles depending on the subject, formulated in a letter from 1647 to a client. The discussion of this text, which appropriates the wording of a treatise on music theory, is of course important for Verdi insofar as he wants to show that Poussin was first and foremost a painter and that theory was secondary for him. The author's take is that the painter found in the theoretical treatise on music something put into words that he had practiced before.

Yet Verdi is not always entirely consistent when pondering theory and practice, for when it comes to the subject of colors in this context, he refers to Poussin's self-portrait in Berlin (Gemäldegalerie, 1649), in which the artist rests one hand on what appears to be a thin book written by him. According to Verdi, its spine "originally bore the inscription 'De lumine et colore,' as shown in a contemporary engraving" (p. 188). Here, the reference to a theoretical examination of color and light by the artist seems to be quite important to the author. However, what Verdi does not address is that during the restoration of the painting in 1994 the inscription turned out to be a later addition and was therefore—reversibly—painted over.^[7] The engraving mentioned by Verdi, which was actually created eleven years after the painting with an arbitrarily added inscription, thus seems to have served as a model here, according to which the picture reproduced in the print was then also completed accordingly.

Verdi concludes his book with pairs of chapters, one devoted to Poussin's landscapes, the other to his contemporaries and the painter's afterlife. Here, as before, the themes of the chapters are well considered and well related to each other. The previous chapter four on "Themes treated Twice" in the oeuvre of Poussin proves to be especially insightful when it comes to demonstrating the painter's creativity and inventiveness, by analyzing how he depicts the same subjects each time in a different, original, and individual way. What is perhaps somewhat lacking in the book is a more differentiated examination of the phenomenon and concept of "beauty," for Nicolas

Poussin's art in particular is a good example of how in the work of one and the same artist something like "aesthetic beauty" (e.g. in the form of appealing fine painting) can be distinguished from "intellectual beauty," which is more about the coherence of the conception of a work. The two ran congruently for a long time in Poussin's work, but then necessarily diverged in favor of "intellectual beauty" when the painter was increasingly unable to control his hands due to Parkinson's disease, and thus had to give up the refined painting style previously practiced. Given that Verdi discusses an impressive amount of Poussin's paintings and drawings (171 works in total) which are also all lavishly displayed in color illustrations throughout the volume, it does not come as a surprise that a few minor errors have crept into the book: Saturn in *Phaeton before Apollo/Helios* (Berlin, Gemäldegalerie, ca. 1629/30), for example, does not hold the "Mirror of Truth" (p. 144) in front of the enthroned god (the personification of summer sitting right below, however, actually holds a mirror as an iconographic attribute), but rather Saturn is shown eating a stone which he believes to be an offspring due to his wife Rea's deceitfulness. Figure 228 does not show the painting *The Family of Darius* by Charles Le Brun (Versailles, Musée de l'Histoire de France), as indicated in the caption, but the copy by Henri Testelin (Château de Versailles, Appartement de la Reine, Antichambre du grand couvert de la Reine, before 1695) executed in an oval as the central ceiling element.

NOTES

[1] See for example publications such as "Poussin's Life in Nineteenth Century Pictures," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXI, 801 (1969): 741–750; "Poussin's 'Eudamidas': Eighteenth-Century Criticism and Copies," *The Burlington Magazine*, CXIII, 822 (1971): 513–524.

[2] See the related catalogues edited by him: *Cézanne and Poussin. The Classical Vision of Landscape* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 1990) and *Nicolas Poussin. 1594–1665* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1995).

[3] Denis Mahon, "A Plea for Poussin as a Painter" in: Georg Kauffmann et al. eds., *Walter Friedlaender zum 90. Geburtstag. Eine Festgabe seiner europäischen Schüler, Freunde und Verehrer* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1965), pp. 113–142. See afterwards the titles of contributions such as by Neil Mac Gregor, "Plaidoyer pour Poussin peintre," in Pierre Rosenberg, ed. *Nicolas Poussin. 1594–1665* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), pp. 118–120 or Sheila Mc Tighe, "Poussin's Practice: A New Plea for Poussin as a Painter," *Kermes*, 94/95 (2015): 1–5.

[4] See Joachim von Sandrart, *Teutsche Academie der Bau- Bild- und Mahlerey-Künste* (Nürnberg: Miltenberger, 1675): TA 1675, II, Buch 3 (niederl. u. dt. Künstler), p. 368, <http://ta.sandrart.net/de/purl/text-598>.

[5] See for the context Nicholas Turner, *Roman Baroque Drawings c. 1620 to c. 1700* (Arthur Ewart Popham, *Italian Drawings in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum*, Vol. 6) (London: Trustees of the British Museum, 1999), Vol. I, Nr. 306, p. 321.

[6] Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori e architetti moderni*, edited by Evelina Borea (Milan: Einaudi, 2009), vol. II, pp. 431–434 and p. 445 as a reaction against Sandrart: TA 1675, II, Buch 3 (niederl. u. dt. Künstler), p. 369, <http://ta.sandrart.net/de/purl/text-599>. See for this also the upcoming German translation and comment on Bellori's Poussin-biography: Elisabeth Oy-Marra, Tristan Weddigen, and Anja Brug, eds., Giovan Pietro Bellori, *Vita di Nicolò Pussino*.

Das Leben des Nicolas Poussin, translated and commented by Henry Keazor (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2023).

[7] Pierre Rosenberg, ed. *Nicolas Poussin. 1594-1665* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), Nr. 189, p. 426.

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