



Poussin and the Dance

by Emily A. Beeny and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper, with a contribution by Jonathan Unglaub, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, & London, The National Gallery, 2021, 144 pp. with 89 colour illustrations, \$30.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781606066836

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Surveys of “Degas and the Dance” appear at regular intervals. Degas is so well known for his ballerinas that it is hard to imagine ballet without him. But one of Degas’s heroes was a painter of dance more than two centuries before, when ballet was emerging as an art form in the seventeenth-century French court. *Poussin and the Dance* by Emily A. Beeny and Francesca Whitlum-Cooper is an elegant and incisive exploration of Poussin’s dancing paintings and the preparatory drawings that rehearsed them. Comprised of five scholarly essays, a chronology, and sumptuous colour plates, the book serves as the catalogue to an exhibition at The National Gallery, London, and the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Beeny and Whitlum-Cooper, who co-curated the exhibition, each contributed two essays to the book. These texts introduce the Apollonian-Dionysian poetics of dance in Poussin’s oeuvre; address the formative influence of Rome and its antiquities; weigh the politics of Poussin’s patrons, in Rome and in France; and compare the dancing pictures to Poussin’s elaborately choreographed renderings of battle and war. The volume concludes with an essay by Jonathan Unglaub on *A Dance to the Music of Time* (ca. 1634), Poussin’s most celebrated painting of dance and a treasure of The Wallace Collection in London. The loosening of loan restrictions on the Wallace collection in 2019 (before then, Wallace works never travelled, not even across town), allowed the curators to borrow the picture for the exhibition’s opening venue at The National Gallery, London. In Los Angeles, an extraordinary programme of commissioned contemporary dance films inspired by Poussin’s work made up for its absence.

Beeny’s contributions, and the exhibition and catalogue as a whole, draw on her doctoral dissertation on *Poussin, Ballet, and the Birth of French Classicism* (Columbia University, 2016), a more detailed and comprehensive academic study of dance (and dance-adjacent) subjects in Poussin’s work of the early to mid-1630s. In her introductory essay, “Invitation to the Dance: Poussin in Rome”, Beeny distills her dissertation’s argument that Poussin’s dancing pictures “charted a new course for his art”, leading him toward “an increasingly cool, abstract formal language to describe the heated movements they represent”. (1) Although we have no firm evidence that Poussin ever saw a ballet, he was certainly aware of it as a developing art form performed in palatial halls for Louis XIII, and he would have understood it as a sublimation of the libidinal and social forces roiling the court. Beeny explains how Poussin further sublimated dance into painting, first by working out his figures’ postures, gestures, and arrangements using small wax models that he clothed and arranged “in a kind of toy-theater tableau”. (8) Modern recreations of this toy theatre by contemporary artists were a highlight of the London and Los Angeles exhibitions, helping viewers to understand the stages of artifice between the artist’s *idea* of dance as an unfolding of turning, springing movement and this idea’s arrested arrangement in paint. Photographs of these wax models would have been a welcome addition to the book.

In “Animating the Frieze”, Whitlum-Cooper delves into the ancient bas-reliefs of dancing figures that Poussin saw in Rome, most notably the Borghese Dancers, to argue that these antique models made his paintings more sculptural. Interlinked arms and shadow-carved contours pay homage to the marbles that inspired them. Although it is unclear how the translation of sculpture to paint helped Poussin in “arresting movement” – how sculpture can

“freeze” movement differently or more emphatically than painting is not answered here – the *frisson* of Poussin’s dancers, caught mid-step, and their emulation of Roman relief sculpture is undeniable. He took these lateral friezes and wound them, like ribbons, into roundels.

Both Beeny and Whitlum-Cooper emphasize the “precision” of Poussin’s choreography, but the movements he represents are not particularly complex or precise *as dance*. What is precise is the choreography of the painting or, as Whitlum-Cooper puts it, “the careful intersections of limbs” that animate his compositions. (33) In “Dances for Richelieu”, Whitlum-Cooper scrutinizes Poussin’s most highly wrought bacchanals, *The Triumph of Pan* (1636) and *The Triumph of Bacchus* (1635–36), painted for the magnificent new palace that Cardinal Richelieu was building between 1630 and 1642 southwest of Paris. In these works, and even more so in their many preparatory drawings, we see Poussin engaged in a transformative creative process to “make drunkenness not only elegant but also erudite”. (51) Drawing on recent conservation treatment and technical analysis of *The Triumph of Silenus* (ca. 1636), a related painting in The National Gallery long doubted by Poussin scholars, Whitlum-Cooper argues for this work’s authenticity, proposing that its relative weakness may indicate a rush job. As for the intended significance of these three *Triumphs* of dance and drunken revelry, she declines to offer an interpretation, but other scholars have read them as statements of power: religious, political, martial, and economic. Circling back to Beeny’s argument that the dancing pictures led Poussin to “an increasingly cool, abstract formal language”, these paintings can be read as allegories of power as control with an undercurrent of reckless abandon. As the Greeks and Nietzsche well knew, both sides of this dialectic are erotic.

In “Choreographing Violence”, Beeny confronts the most blatant merger of sex and power in Poussin’s oeuvre: his two paintings of *The Abduction of the Sabine Women*. (The one at The Met is dated 1633–34 and the one in the Louvre is dated ca. 1634–35.) Beeny compares these works as different approaches to the depiction of rape, one showing “drastic chaos and despair” and the other “extraordinary restraint”. (81) Her argument hinges on the works’ different patrons. The Met picture, painted for a French courtier and general, orders the violence into a balletic frieze, as if testifying to the power of war to bring about civilization; while the Louvre picture, painted for a future cardinal, shows a “shuddering aversion to sexual violence” that effectively criminalizes pre-Christian Rome. The argument is convincing, and it is to Poussin’s credit that neither painting revels in the violence it represents, and that his bacchanals picture women (and even babies!) as rowdy hedonists on par with men.

In *Heaven on Earth: Painting and the Life to Come* (London, Thames & Hudson, 2018), T. J. Clark examines Poussin’s fascination with “the strange upright posture of the human body” as “a constitutive feature of the human”. (136) How often, Clark asks, do we come across a painter who so convincingly represents the gravitational weight of bodies against the earth, their feet planted firmly, not just *paintedly*, on the ground? Clark focuses on the *Sacraments*, a group of fourteen religious paintings (in two sets, one dated to the late 1630s and the other to the mid-late 1640s) from a later phase in Poussin’s career, after he had abandoned dance as a subject. But several of his observations hold across the artist’s oeuvre.

Poussin’s dancers are remarkably grounded, a quality that seems diametrically opposed to ballet as an art of artificial lightness and lift. In fact, we know precious little about the actual movements, or even the movement *quality*, of the *ballet de cour* in the 1630s, prior to the codification of the five positions by Pierre Beauchamps in the mid-late seventeenth century. Maybe Poussin’s dancers, with their lower centre of gravity, offer some indication of what this early ballet was, or maybe he was too much an artist of the ground plane, as Clark argues, to paint them any other way. Even the revellers precariously balanced on one leg (a recurrent motif), arching back or plunging forward, are believably earth-bound, their weight directed

downward, either gripping the dirt from toe to heel or rolling through the foot on their way down from a jump. Rarely (ever?) do we see a dancer lift off, or look as if about to. The tell is in the upper body, in the lack of contracting tension in the torso, a slack muscularity that gives the pictures their downbeat equilibrium and Dionysian release. The Sabine women are the exception that proves the rule: although they have lift-off, and reach desperately toward the sky, they are held up by their captors, their feet wriggling in torment off the ground. To be airborne in these works is to be less than human, a state change toward hell.

Unglaub's essay on *A Dance to the Music of Time* as "The Wellspring of the Modes" revisits the operatic oeuvre and intellectual circle of the work's patron – the prelate, poet, and impresario Giulio Rospigliosi – to argue that Poussin's collaboration with Rospigliosi led him to formulate his famous theory of the Modes. Based on ancient Greek musical theory, Poussin's idea was that a painter's pictorial manner must suit the theme, the scene, and the emotion depicted. This "necessary harmony of style and subject" (108) is articulated in a letter Poussin wrote to his most important French patron, Paul Fréart de Chantelou, in 1647, a decade after he had abandoned dance as a subject and almost as many years since his collaboration with Rospigliosi had come to an end. Unglaub nonetheless considers this collaboration "decisive", providing good evidence that Rospigliosi evaluated paintings in a modal framework and that his colleague in the Barberini circle, Giovanni Battista Doni, was exploring similar ideas in the staging of music. It is a compelling connection, and one that invites further application of Poussin's modal thinking to his earlier work. His swings from the languid sensuality of the early bacchanals, to the thundering violence of the *Abductions*, to the wild ecstasy of the *Triumphs*, to the balletic poise of *A Dance to the Music of Time*, to the intellectual gravity of *Et in Arcadia Ego* (1637–38), are as crucial to his long legacy as the stoic rigour his name tends to invoke. This last painting shows how Poussin could even choreograph a philosophical problem, its meaning found in the graceful arrangement of arms and legs, gesturing hands, and tilts of the head.

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