

NICOLAS POUSSIN

"SELF-PORTRAIT"

25 OCTOBER 2022 – 15 JANUARY 2023

NICOLAS POUSSIN (1594-1665) is arguably the greatest French painter, despite having spent almost forty years in Rome, where he settled in 1624 at the age of 30. Poussin managed to stand out in this highly competitive environment, where the finest painters from all over Europe came to learn their craft and attempt to outdo one another, and it was there that he received a commission to produce a large altar painting for Saint Peter's Basilica, in February 1628 (*The Martyrdom of Saint Erasmus*, Vatican Pinacoteca). Aware of the artist's growing fame, Louis XIII and his chief minister, Cardinal Richelieu, asked him to return to France and take up the position of First painter to the King. Poussin only stayed in Paris for two years, between 1640 and 1642, unable to tolerate the intrigues and the baseness and jealousy that his eminent position seemed to inspire. According to the precepts of the stoic philosophy he had adopted, rather than directing vast decorative works in royal residences, the painter preferred to keep his distance, as a spectator, painting small-scale pictures with subtle poetry and great philosophical depth. In 1642, he thus found a pretext to return to Rome, where he remained until his death in 1665.

In 1647, five years after his return to the papal city, two of his closest friends, Paul Fréart de Chantelou and Jean Pointel, each asked him for a self-portrait as a mark of their loyal friendship, but also to enhance their own respective collections, which included various masterpieces by Poussin. The artist hesitated for some time, as he did not like painting portraits, and even considered entrusting the task to another painter. He finally decided to accept, writing to tell Chantelou that he was reserving for him the most accomplished self-portrait, the one that looked most like him: that painting, dating from 1650, now belongs to the Louvre (the *Self-portrait* sent to Pointel was painted six months earlier, in 1649, and is currently held by the Gemäldegalerie in Berlin).

In the *Self-portrait* in the Louvre, Poussin represents himself in an austere fashion, wearing



Nicolas Poussin (Les Andelys, 1594 - Rome, 1665)

Self-portrait

1650, signed and dated

Inscription: EFFIGIES NICOLAI POUSSINI

ANDELYENSIS PICTORIS. ANNO AETATIS. 56. ROMAE

ANNO JUBILEI 1650 [Portrait of Nicolas Poussin, painter from Andelys, aged 56 years. Rome, jubilee year 1650]

Oil on canvas

98 × 74 cm

Paris, musée du Louvre, inv. 7302

an anthracite coat and a black cape. His expression is severe, impassive, impenetrable. The artist appears in a three-quarter view, his face turned forwards and his gaze meeting that of the viewer. His hand rests on a rolled sheaf of papers with a red tie, no doubt an allusion to the letters he exchanged with Chantelou, with whom he remained in correspondence for almost thirty years. On the little finger of the right hand (actually his left hand, because the *Self-portrait* was painted in front of a mirror), Poussin wears

a ring with a pyramid-shaped diamond, a stoic symbol of strength and constancy, symbolically emphasising his steadfast nature and the loyalty of his friendship with Chantelou. Above all, he represents himself as a painter, posing in front of four framed pictures: to the right is a canvas with a Latin inscription showing his name, his age (56), his native city (Andelys, in Normandy), and the year 1650; another canvas, to the left, of which we only see a part, shows a woman, welcomed by two outstretched arms, wearing a diadem decorated with an eye. She is an allegory of Painting. The two hands that encircle her represent a 'love of painting and friendship towards the intended owner of the picture,' according to Poussin's biographer, Giovanni Pietro Bellori. Created as much by the soul as by the hand, it is a philosophical painting, as we can infer from the eye in the diadem, which adorns the allegory's face, the eye of the spirit that must complete and surpass the eye of the body, the receiver of the visual sensation.

Poussin chose to represent himself, then, as a painter-philosopher. Note the painter's shadow falling over the canvas to the right, above the inscription that bears the artist's name, as a manifestation of vanity.

After his death, Poussin became the absolute model of the classical tradition taught at the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture in Paris,

under Charles le Brun. King Louis XIV was able to purchase more than thirty of Poussin's paintings, which were displayed in the rooms of the palace of Versailles. However, Poussin's *Self-portrait*, which remained in the Chantelou family, was only purchased by the Louvre in 1797. Its very precise composition, meticulously defined by the horizontal and vertical lines of the sober gilt frames that Poussin favoured, as well as the noble figure of the artist himself, made it a source of fascination for many painters: Joshua Reynolds drew inspiration from it for his own *Self-portrait*, painted in around 1776 (National Trust); and Ingres and Seurat produced some studies based on the work.

The *Self-portrait* is, more than anything, a moving testimony to friendship; and it also became the emblematic image of this stern and rigorous genius.

NICOLAS MILOVANOVIC
Head curator at the musée du Louvre

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