

## Mythological Themes in Nicolas Poussin's Early Works : Reflections on *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*

SHIMBATA Yasuhide

Though already over thirty when he arrived in Rome in 1624, Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) was still capable of absorbing the influences of various artistic styles. No mere eclectic, he was motivated without prejudice or preconception by a willingness to study works of the past and of his own time in the steady pursuit of self-improvement. As a result, the character of his works continued to change until the mid-1630s, in the process of which he abstracted a style of his own. Based on my former researches on Poussin's works from the 1630s centering mainly on his mythological subjects<sup>1)</sup>, this text examines *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* in the collection of the National Museum of Kassel, Germany<sup>2)</sup> (B198/T44) (fig. 1) among what appears to be a series of works that display similarly sensual scenes in relatively small, vertical canvases.

As previously delineated by Denis Mahon in 1962, Poussin's early styles can be roughly classified into the following three phases<sup>3)</sup>: The first stage (1624–27) was classicist. The posture of the figures, the composition, and the emotions expressed, reminiscent of ancient relief paintings, show the influence of Domenichino. His works of this period are experimental, however, and, as he had not yet

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- 1) SHIMBATA Yasuhide, "À propos de *l'Empire de Flore*, (Galerie de Dresde) de Nicolas Poussin : ses sources iconographiques" (summary in French), *The Seijo Bungei* (The Seijo University Arts and Literature Quarterly), No. 156, December 1996, pp. 34–69.
  - 2) B=Anthony Blunt, *The Paintings of Nicolas Poussin: A Critical Catalogue*, London, 1966; T=Jacques Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, Paris, 1994.
  - 3) Denis Mahon, "Poussin's Early Development: An Alternative Hypothesis", in *The Burlington Magazine*, CII-688, July, 1960, pp. 288–344. See also, Konrad Oberhuber, *Poussin: The Early Years in Rome*, New York, 1988, pp. 21–34.

attained a firm grasp of composition, they reveal his trial-and-error efforts with perspective and proportions of the human body, as for example with *The Victory of Joshua over the Amalekites* (B29/T17). In the second stage (1628-30), Poussin studied the visual vocabularies of Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini and Pietro da Cortona and took up the challenge of larger works. In contrast to his first stage, he concentrated more on composition, emphasizing shades of light and color over attention to individual forms. This was the only period of his career during which he tended toward the Baroque, for example, *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (B97/T69). During his third stage (1631-33), under the influence of Andrea Sacchi, he turned back toward classicism. Though he was aware of the Venetian School use of color, he carefully avoided extreme contrasts of light and dark and vivid hues, adopting harmonious compositions in gold-based tone stressing the rhythm of the whole and elegance rather than dynamism, for example *The Kingdom of Flora* (B155/T84). His third style had evolved slowly after that, until his return to Paris in 1640. Able to observe and learn directly from works by Raphael and Giulio Romano, his contours became sharper, his colors grew more sophisticated, the forms of his human figures became more solid, and his compositions were increasingly disciplined. As the refinement of his paintings increased, he perfected a classicist style that both met the demands of the seventeenth century and satisfied his own disposition as an artist.

Supporting the evolution of Poussin's style especially during the third phase, is believed to be the inspiration provided by the intellectual company that surrounded him as an artist. It is well known that he was influenced by Cassiano Dal Pozzo, secretary to Cardinal Francesco Barberini. Poussin was much stimulated and motivated toward the thorough examination of ancient painting techniques by Cassiano Dal Pozzo's pursuit of science, natural history, and above all, archaeology. It is also said, that Cassiano Dal Pozzo introduced him to the paintings of Giovanni Bellini and Titian at the Villa Aldobrandini and to the Ludovisi Collection, while encouraging him to add a spiritual quality to the light and color applied by these masters. Even though Cassiano Dal Pozzo could not be called his only source of inspiration, it is true that the primary elements that

determined Poussin's style in his early Roman period appeared to originate in their association: close observation of nature, reference to literature, and the art of antiquity, warm colors and the poetic, sensual mood of Venetian School painting<sup>4</sup>).

Poussin's works from around 1630 demonstrate the two elements that Yves Bonnefoy, in his *Rome 1630*, considers fundamental throughout the artist's career: "*l'expression spontanée, irrationnelle et pour une part inconsciente d'un tempérament* (a spontaneous, non-rational, partly unconscious expression of a certain temperament)" and "*la contrainte toujours lucide, bien que variable dans ses méthodes, que cherche à exercer sur lui volonté fortement armée de logique* (consistently visible resistance to the ideologically armed force countering that temperament)". His works of the early 1630s may ultimately be the product of his grappling with these two coexisting elements<sup>5</sup>. Discovering within himself sensibilities similar to the sensual expression of the Venetian masters, Poussin set himself free in the boundlessly imaginary world of fantasy. This may be why he often painted such subjects as Bacchus. They even include the obviously erotic "Satyr striking at Venus" (fig. 2) as seen in ancient reliefs and prints by Caracci (fig. 3, 4). These works are clearly inspired by the personality within the artist that Poussin could not tame by reason<sup>6</sup>.

Here it may be useful to gain an understanding of the market for art in Rome of that day. Rome was an international metropolis, whose market in art was enlivened by the comings and goings of people from other lands. Paintings were collected as well as traded freely by members of the rising new generation of art connoisseurs and intellectuals, and disseminated all over Europe. As a result, the

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4) Walter Friedlaender, *Nicolas Poussin: A New Approach*, New York, 1966, p. 17: see also, Charles Dempsey, "Poussin's 'Sacrament of Confirmation', the Scholarship of 'Roma Sotterranea', and dal Pozzo's Museum chartaceum", in Francesco Solinas (ed.), *Cassiano dal Pozzo: Atti del Seminario Internazionale di Studi*, Roma, 1989.

5) Yves Bonnefoy, *Rome 1630*, Paris, 1970, pp. 105-106.

6) Jacques Thuillier, *Nicolas Poussin*, Paris, 1994, pp. 44-51.

paintings Poussin was inevitably commissioned to produce were the kind of small tableaux of allegorical love stories or moral tales that would serve their purpose. Poussin's love for pastoral, sensual fantasy, and allegorical themes coincided with this demand<sup>7)</sup>.

*Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* is a work that illustrates this trend of those times. This small tableau (96.5x75.5cm) in oil on canvas is now owned by the National Museum in Kassel, Germany<sup>8)</sup>. It shows a pastoral scene in a merry mood where a half-naked nymph pointing the way is about to mount a satyr kneeling down on the ground. One adorable putto stands before them while another one is pushing the nymph from behind. A male figure, probably another satyr, is bent under the weight of a basketful of food he carries on his head as if searching for a place for a picnic.

The first time this painting appears in extant documents is the 1749 collection catalog of Count Wilhelm (1682–1760). According to this record, the painting was purchased on the occasion of an April 2, 1731 sale at Cornelis Wittert Van Valkenburg in Rotterdam<sup>9)</sup>. Earlier than this, a painting by Poussin of a satyr carrying a woman on its back is listed in two late-seventeenth-century Antwerp

7) Regarding Poussin's sensual theme, see, Thuillier, op. cit., 1994, pp. 85–86.

8) Principal literatures on this painting are as follows: John Smith, *A Catalogue Raisonné of the Works of the Most Eminent, Dutch, Flemish, and French Painters*, vol. 8, London, 1837, No. 225.; Walter Friedlaender, *Nicolas Poussin: Die Entwicklung Seiner Kunst*, München, 1914, pp. 46, 158.; Otto von Grautoff, *Nicolas Poussin: Sein Werk und Sein Leben*, München, 1914, No. 51; Emile Magne, *Nicolas Poussin: Premier peintre du roi*, Bruxelles & Paris, 1914, No. 30; Blunt, op. cit., 1966, No. 198; Jacques Thuillier, *Tout l'œuvre peint de Poussin*, Paris, 1974, No. 38; Doris Wild, *Nicolas Poussin*, Zürich, 1980, R30; Oberhuber, op. cit., 1988, No. 79; Bernhard Schnackenburg, *Gämaldegalerie Alte Meister Gesamtkatalog*, Philipp von Zabern, Mainz am Rhein, 1996, GK459.

9) *Sr Hoch Fürstl. Durchlt HERREN Langgrafens Wilhelm zu Hessen, sämtlichen Schildereyen, und Portraits*, 1749, No. 144., cf. Pierre Rosenberg, Guido Jansen, Jeroen Giltaij, *Chefs-d'œuvre de la peinture française des musées néerlandais, XVII<sup>e</sup>–XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècles*, 1992, Dijon, Musée des Beaux-Arts, p. 38.

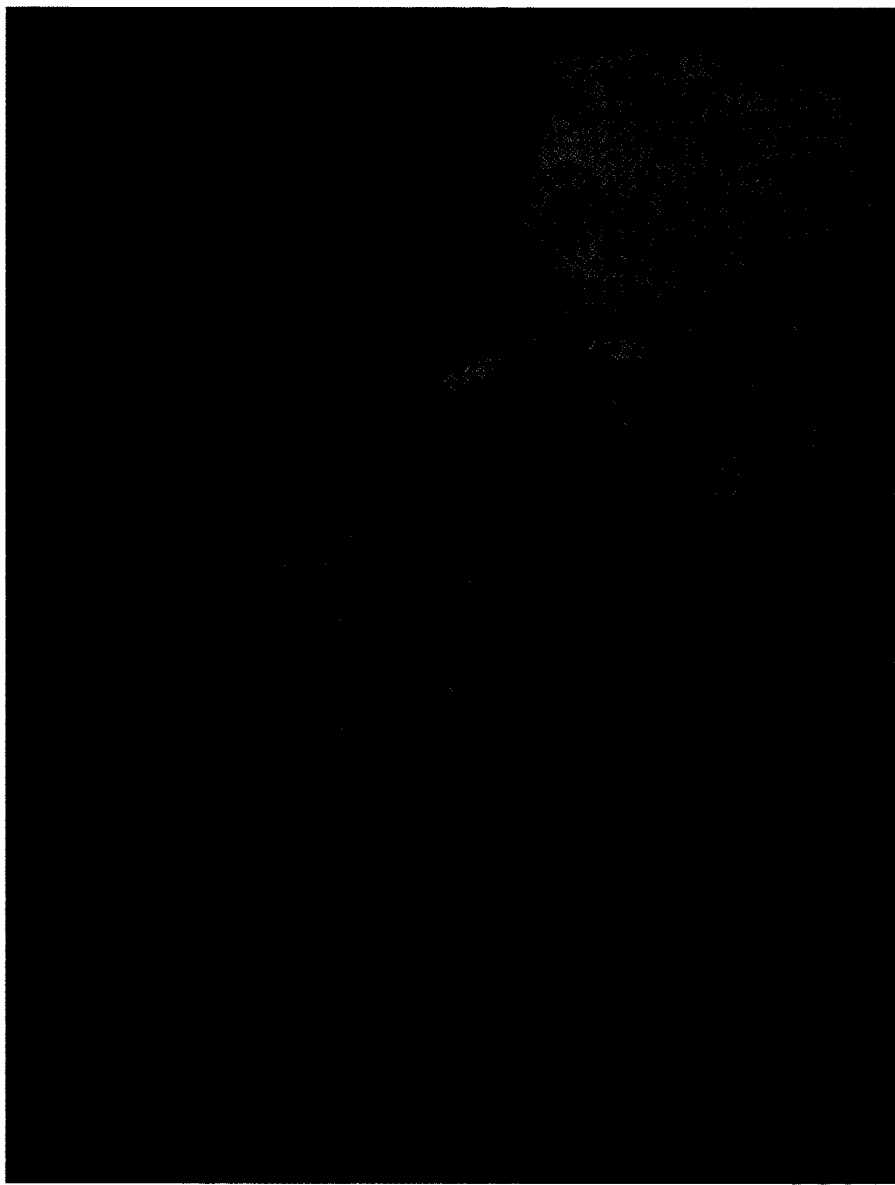


fig.1 Nicolas Poussin, *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*, 1630, 96.5×75.5cm,  
Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, Kassel, (B198).

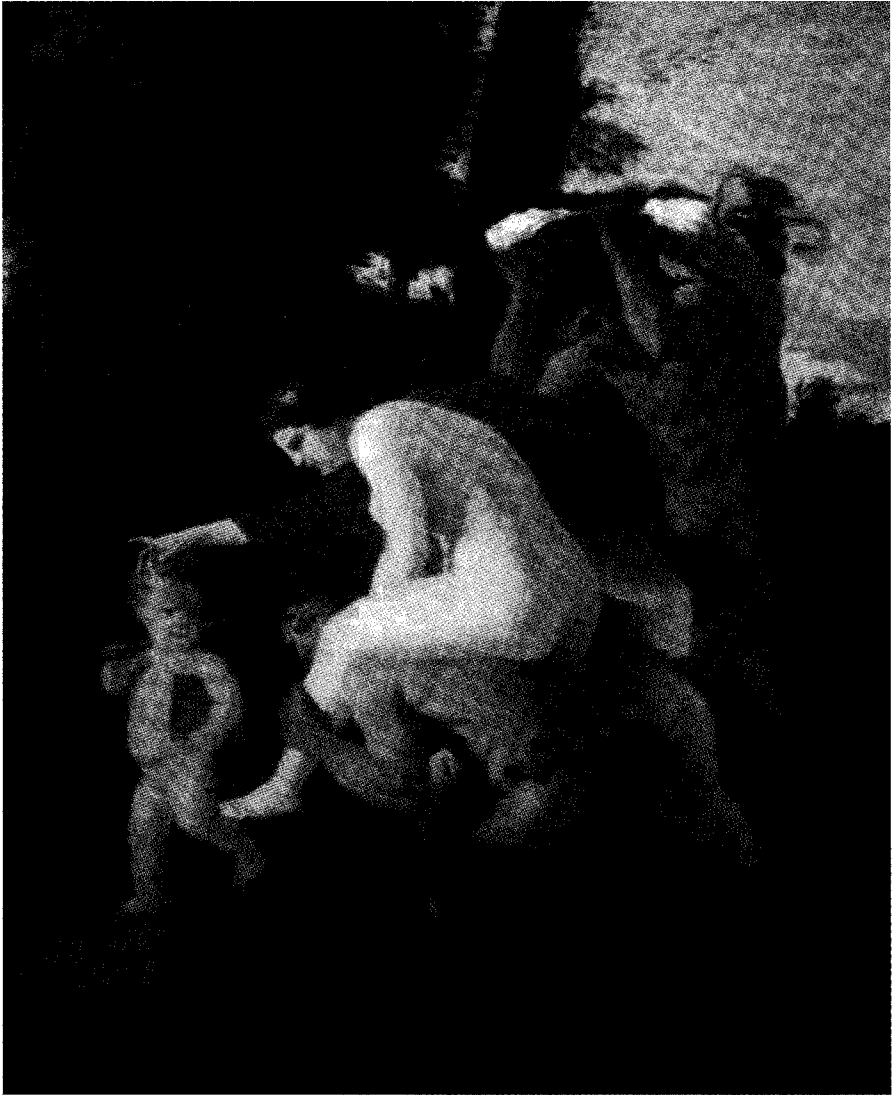


fig.6 Nicolas Poussin (after), *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*, 87×69cm,  
Musée Bonnat, Bayonne.

collection catalogs of Alexander Voet (1689) and of Jean-Baptiste Anthoine (1691). While the work may be identical to the one sold in 1749, but it is not yet verified<sup>10</sup>. In addition, neither early biographers such as Giovanni Pietro Bellori and Andre Felibien nor any others make any mention of this painting in their literature.

Regarding *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*, leading Poussin scholars such as Walter Friedlaender, Otto von Grautoff, Emile Magne, Jacques Thuillier, Denis Mahon, Anthony Blunt, Konrad Oberhuber, and others confirm its attribution to Poussin while Doris Wild alone is skeptical, considering the artist to be so-called "the Master of the Bacchanale" as with other paintings like *The Triumph of Neptune* (Collection of National Gallery, London) (B133/T52) and *Midas Washing at the Source of the Pactolus* (Collection of Metropolitan Museum, New York) (B165/T47), which are usually attributed to Poussin.

In the absence of any written evidence, scholars have variously estimated the date, using as their sole reliable yardstick their personal appraisal of its position in the complex chronological development of Poussin's early styles: Grautoff at 1632-36, Blunt at around 1635, Mahon at around 1630, Oberhuber around 1629 and Thuillier 1626-27. Considering the at-first-glance fluid yet relatively stable composition, emphatic vertical and horizontal lines, and the Venetian School-influenced, elegant colors, sometime around 1630 seems to be the best assumption.

Regarding related drawings, there is one sketch (18.5x15.2cm) (fig. 5) in sanguine on beige paper (Collection of the British Museum), which was unusual for Poussin<sup>11</sup>. The date of the sketch with its light outlines is dated to the early 1630s by Brigstocke, while Pierre Rosenberg and Louis-Antoine Prat put it at 1626-27, following the date of the painting proposed by Jacques Thuillier. The

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10) Pierre Rosenberg, Louis Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin: La collection du Musée Bonnat à Bayonne*, Paris, 1994, p. 22.

biggest difference between the drawing and the painting is the absence of the satyr carrying the basket. The rest of the figures are about the same in both poses and positions. However, there are other differences in detail: There are seven pipes in the whistle that the left putto carries in the painting and only four in that of the drawing. In the drawing, the satyrs do not have ivy around their waists. The nymph is not wearing a gold tiara-like headdress. The drape does not cover her arm. The winged putto's hand pushing the nymph from behind is the opposite. There is no woods in the background of the drawing on the left-hand side. The two large trees in the center lean slightly toward the left in the drawing, while to the right in the painting. Although roughly depicted, the drawing's composition is symmetrical and more stable. The figures are portrayed like relief figures raised off the surface.

Today there are at least eight known copies of this painting. Among them, those in the Bonnat Museum, Bayonne (fig. 6), the John Blackwood Collection and at Fontaine-Henri Castle, Carvados are of acknowledged quality<sup>12)</sup>. As Andreas Andresen maintains, there is only one print reproduction by Maurice Blot (1753–1818). A print of similar composition was made by Philippe Joseph Tassaert (1732–1803) in 1769, but it appears to have been based on the copy in the Blackwood Collection<sup>13)</sup>.

The oldest remaining document that gives a name to the painting at Kassel is

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- 11) Walter Friedlaender, Anthony Blunt, *The Drawings of Nicolas Poussin, Catalogue Raisonné*, vol. 3, 1953, No. 229; Oberhuber, op. cit., 1988, No. 169; Hugh Brigstocke, *A Loan Exhibition of Drawings by Nicolas Poussin from British Collection*, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1990, No. 23; Pierre Rosenberg, Louis-Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin: Catalogue raisonné des dessins*, tome 1, Milano, 1994, No. 32.
- 12) Blunt, op. cit., 1967, p. 137; Pierre Rosenberg, Louis Antoine Prat, *Nicolas Poussin: La collection du musée Bonnat à Bayonne*, Paris, 1994, pp. 22–25, No. 1.
- 13) A. Andresen, *Nicolaus Poussin: Verzeichniss der nach seinen Gemälden gefertigten gleichzeitigen und späteren Kupferstiche*, Leipzig, 1863, No. 380; Georges Wildenstein, 'Catalogue des Gravures de Poussin par Andresen', in *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Juillet-Août, 1962, p. 181.



a 1731 sale catalog, namely: "A Fable of Ovid" [Ean fabel vit Ovidius]. After this come many documents giving various titles to the painting and related works. The inscription on the print by Maurice Blot is "Voyage of Fauns, Satyrs, and Hamadryads [Voyage de faunes, de satyrs et d'hamadryades]" and the 1769 print (a copy) by Philippe Joseph Tassaert is "Bacchanalians: Nymph Riding Astride Satyr [Bacchanalians: Nymphche chevauchant un satyre]." The 1837 œuvre catalog compiled by John Smith lists it as "A Nymph with a Satyre and Cupids" (he refers to its copies or the Tassaert print), Andresen's print reproduction catalog of 1863 has the painting along with its copy as "Nymph Riding on Satyr [Die auf dem Satyre reitende Nymphe]," Magne (1914) has "Bacchanale, Nymphe portée par un Satyre," Grautoff (1914) "A Bacchic Scene in the Wood," Friedlaender (1914) "Nymphe, die auf dem Rucken eines Satyrn reitet," Blunt (1966) "Nymph, Satyr, Faun and Cupids," Thuillier (1974) "Nymph astride Satyr [Nymphe chevauchant un Satyre]," Wild (1980) "Vulgar Love [Amor volgare]" for a copy, Christopher Wright (1985) "Nymphs on the back of a Satyr (Profane Love)," Oberhuber (1988) "Nymph, Satyr, Faun and Cupids." finally the National Museum of Kassel describes it as "Bacchic Scene [Bacchische Szene]".

Looking at these titles, it is obvious that no one has clearly identified the theme of the painting. Among the few documents that deal with its meaning, Anthony Blunt offers an interpretation in connection with the series of related works. First, referring to *Nymph Riding a Goat* (Collection of Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg) (B199/T82), he notes that its allegorical meaning was the victory of "true love" over the "avenger of unrequited love" that is represented by Eros's battling against Anteros at the left corner of the painting. The victory is represented again in the putto who has the goat (a symbol of sensuality) drawn by a rope of flowers, a metaphor for marriage. He points out that *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* is also an associated theme considering the half-animal man is not a satyr but Pan because it carries a whistle and a special staff. Since the satyr looks obedient to the nymph because she is directing the way, Blunt concludes that the nymph is Venus taming the satyr with the assistance of the cupids<sup>14</sup>. Probably

based on a similar interpretation, Doris Wild and Christopher Wright later gave the work the title "Profane Love," although they did not identify the characters in the image. Konrad Oberhuber also believes the theme is "a metaphor for marriage" and notes that a painting titled *Mars and Venus* (1629 spring, collection of Boston Museum of Fine Arts) (B183/T61) was painted about the same time and on the same theme. He considers *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* was probably painted more spontaneously than *Mars and Venus*, which is obviously erotic with its humorous portrayal of Mars, hesitating to surrender his weapon but unable to resist Venus's seduction<sup>15</sup>). Erika Simon gives a different interpretation. She considers the nymph to be Kybele and the man Marsyas, the satyr well-known as a good flutist. Considering that Kybele is mother goddess of ancient Phrygia and her attributes are a crown in the shape of rampart with a turret, a scepter, and a sphere, this is an interesting theory. It is also notable that the nymph in another associated painting *Nymph with a Satyr Drinking* (Collection of Pushkin Museum) (B200/T45b) holds a sphere, yet the lion, her most important attribute, is absent<sup>16</sup>). Among these scholars, it was Walter Friedlaender who explained the iconographical source most clearly (fig. 7). He pointed out that the kind of pagan genre scenes with a nymph astride a goat and people drinking, from which Carracci family took their playful subject to depict for the small room in the Farnese Palace, had often been carved on cameos and precious stones from antiquity<sup>17</sup>).

It was rather, however, the reliefs on ancient sarcophagi and the sixteenth-

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14) Anthony Blunt has done the iconographical interpretation to *Nymph with a Satyr Drinking*, Collection of Pushkin Museum (B200/T45b) and *Nymph with a Satyr Drinking*, Collection of Pushkin Museum, (B200/T45b), in the same way. See Anthony Blunt, *Nicolas Poussin*, New York, 1967, vol. 1, pp. 134-135.

15) Oberhuber, op. cit., 1988, p. 224.

16) Erika Simon, 'Poussins Gemälde "Bacchus und Midas" in München', in *Jahrbuch der Hamburger Kunstsammlungen*, 1973, Bd. 18, pp. 109-118.

17) Friedlaender, op. cit., 1966, p. 104. Regarding the work, see Donald Posner, Annibale Carracci, (National Gallery of Art: Kress Foundation Studies in the History of European Art 5), Phaidon, New York, 1971, vol. 2, no. 111t.

century prints that Poussin referred to as his iconographical source in the 1630s. This is corroborated by Giovanni Pietro Bellori's report that Poussin studied prints by Raphael and Giulio Romano in the collection of Courtois (who is described by Bellori as a mathematician to the King) before he left Paris for Rome and by the records showing that there were as many as 1,300 prints by Marcantonio Raimondi, members of the Carracci family, Giulio Romano, and others in Poussin's studio after his death<sup>18</sup>). In ascertaining the visual sources of *Nymph Riding Astride a Satyr*, study of these preceding images is therefore essential<sup>19</sup>).

As mentioned above, around 1630 Poussin continued to create the works representing pastoral, sensual fantasies and allegorical themes while pursuing a classicist style. As antecedents of this kind, one would first think of the sixteenth-century prints portraying overtly erotic scenes of the mythological love stories of gods and goddesses. The best known are Marcantonio Raimondi's serial works of 1524 (fig. 8) and Agostino Carracci's even bolder series called "Lascivie" of the 1590s (fig. 9). While provoking Papal wrath at their licentiousness, these works were created to revive the themes of classical antiquity in common with the extravagant mythological love stories depicted by Titian. It may be said that the Renaissance enthusiasm that welcomed this kind of work for very direct reasons also prevailed in Poussin's time<sup>20</sup>). Indeed, in the early years of his career, Poussin often borrowed from Raimondi's sleeping nymph raped by a satyr (fig.

18) Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le vite de' pittori, scultori ed architetti moderni*, Roma, 1672, (ed. E. Borea, Torino, 1976, p. 423) ; Wild, op. cit, 1980, Bd. I, pp. 197-198.

19) For the former iconography of Poussin's *Nymph Riding a Goat*, "Venus Pandemos", which was popular in the classic and Renaissance ages, was pointed out in the book as follows ; Natalia Serebriannaïa, et al., *Nicolas Poussin (Musée de L'Ermitage, Musée des Beaux-Arts Pouchkine)*, Paris, 1990, pp. 98-101.

20) Cf. Paula Findlen, 'Humanism, Politics and Pornography in Renaissance Italy' in *The Invention of Pornography : Obscenity and the Origins of Modernity, 1500-1800*, ed. by Lynn Hunt, New York, 1996, pp. 54-76 ; Konrad Oberhuber, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, 1978, New York, No. 231 (186) ; Diane DeGrazia Bohlin, *Prints and Related Drawings by the Carracci Family : A Catalogue Raisonné*, Washington National Gallery, 1979, pp. 289-305.

10)<sup>21)</sup>. In that sense, the latter's *Nymph and Satyr*<sup>22)</sup> should be considered as related to the subject-matter of *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*.

Comparing their similar themes, however, Raimondi's portrays the travesty of pillage (fig. 11), while Poussin's shows more figures strolling peacefully in a pastoral setting. Though figures on piggyback probably would seem rare in mythological paintings, they often appear as a part of parades on satyr-related subjects such as "Siren's triumph" represented on ancient reliefs and in the works of Mantegna<sup>23)</sup> and Raimondi<sup>24)</sup>. Also, figures riding on a satyr's back appear by themselves in the art of antiquity<sup>25)</sup> (fig. 12) and of Raimondi<sup>26)</sup> (fig. 13). *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* probably belongs to that tradition. In addition, the familial atmosphere in the painting may be the result of a merging with another common subject, "the satyr family." For reference, I would like to mention that there is a print, created by Nicolas Chapron (1612-1656) from the same town as Poussin, which shows figures evoking a family accompanied by a Siren (fig. 14). As Poussin gave allegorical meaning to the story of Ovid in *The Kingdom of Flora*, his mythological paintings of the 1630s are likely to have deeper content; *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr*, therefore, may have yet another, hidden layer of meaning. Basically, however, the theme is probably the joy of life similar to the Bacchanale that Poussin continuously developed in subsequent years.

As mentioned above, several copies of *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* exist and Walter Friedlaender suspects that they are variants painted by Poussin himself. With its elegant atmosphere and small size, this painting must have received

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21) Konrad Oberhuber, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, 1978, New York, No. 223-I (182).

22) Konrad Oberhuber, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, 1978, New York, No. 300 (277).

23) Mark Zucker, ed., *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 25, 1980, New York, No. 20 (240).

24) *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, No. 240 (192).

25) *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae (LIMC)*, VIII, Zürich & Düsseldorf, 1997, No. Pan-177.

26) *The Illustrated Bartsch*, vol. 26, No. 305 (231).

unusual appreciation for Poussin's work in later ages. The painting has been often described as the harbinger of eighteenth-century French paintings by Jean-Antoine Watteau, François Boucher, and Jean Honoré Fragonard<sup>27)</sup>. As Heinrich Wölfflin pointed out, Poussin eventually established a classicist style for his own times apart from the influence of Raphael in spite of his admiration for the great master, because he was able to integrate the sensual forms and logical idea evoking antecedent images and he became aware of his innermost, Titianesque or Annibale Carracciesque affinity for sensual pleasure as an inevitable drive contrasting with Raphael. Therefore the *Nymph Riding Astride Satyr* at Kassel should not be considered merely a by-product of the Bacchanale series, but the point of departure of a current of experimentation with original ideas taking place within Poussin's own œuvre.

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27) Friedlaender, 1966, p. 104.; Anthony Blunt, *The Drawing of Poussin*, New Haven & London, 1979, p. 91.

\* I am grateful to Ms. Sumiko Yamakawa for her help to the English translation of this text from Japanese.

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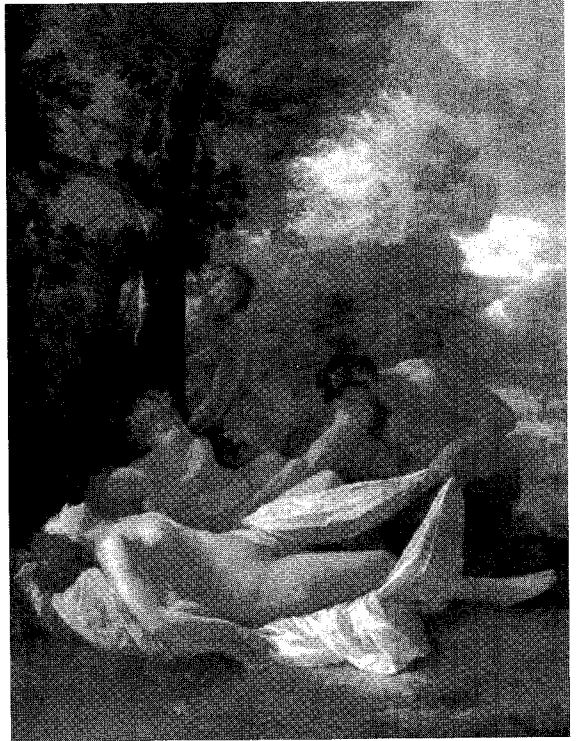


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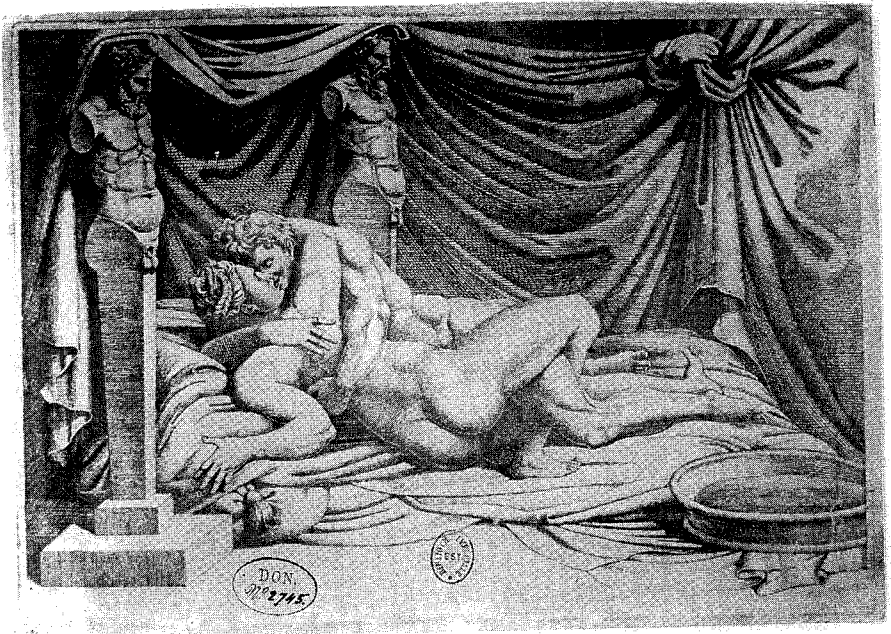


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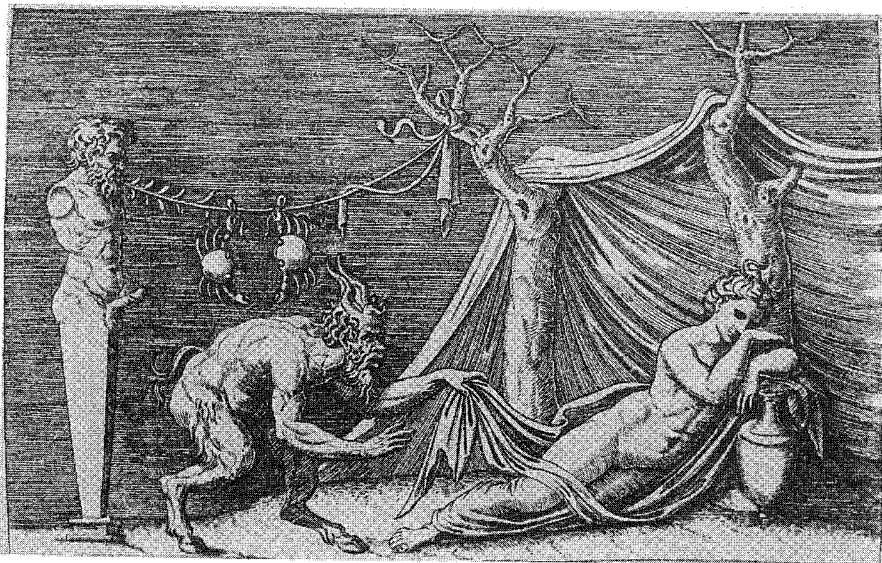


fig.10 Marcantonio Raimondi, *Satyr Discovering a Sleeping Nymph*, from Ancient Bas reliefs, 11.2×17.8cm, Department of Prints and Photographs, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

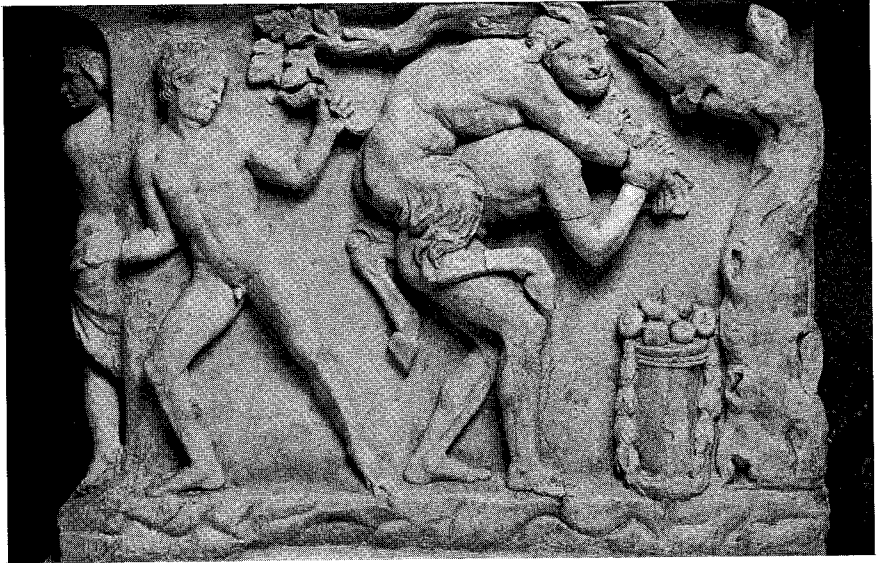


fig.12 *Pan Carried by Two Erotes and a Satyr*, 160's AD, Subiaco, S. Scolastica, (LIMC-8- Pan223).



fig.13 Marcantonio Raimondi, *Two Satyrs with a Nymph*, 18.7×13.4cm, Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen, Preussischer Kulturbesitz, Berlin.



fig.14 Nicolas Chapron, *A Family Accompanied by a Siren*, 17th Century, Engraving.