

Those who wish to acquaint themselves with the case for 'free' schools—as Italian Catholics, who are also loyal citizens of the Republic, see this—can be recommended to read the June number of *Vita e Pensiero*, which is entirely devoted to the question. One at least of the articles, 'Valore educativo della scuola libera', by L. Giussani, is of a quality that transcends the particular circumstances of the Italian debate.

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## HEARD AND SEEN

### Nicolas Poussin

IT is one of the happy accidents of travel to be able to recognize an echo, however unlikely or late. So it was that a few days after seeing the incomparable Poussin exhibition, which has during this summer given such appropriate glory to four vast galleries of the Louvre, a painting, by the nineteenth-century Provençal painter Granet, of the death of Poussin gave a sharpened pleasure to a visit to the collection in the Musée at Aix. Perhaps Poussin would not altogether have approved of this muddy picture, whose good intentions—its ordered grouping, its inherent gravity—are nevertheless plain to see. Poussin is shown dying with dignity, and the too easily assumed consolations of religion are recalled with deliberation. The great painter of *The Seven Sacraments* had always insisted on the primacy of order, in painting and in life alike; and in death, too, Granet's picture reminds us, as though to give the final point to an achievement that was all lucidity and light.

The Louvre exhibition, drawing on collections as distant as the Hermitage in Leningrad or the Melbourne National Gallery, provides the full evidence for the monumental work of a painter who has too often been labelled and then left to the art historians. The rehabilitation of Poussin is in fact principally due to English scholars, as the splendid catalogue shows, since it is almost exclusively the work of Sir Anthony Blunt and Mr Charles Sterling. Confronted by the sheer extent of the exhibition (and recognizing many familiar pictures from English collections which have found a true setting in these noble salons), one is first of all aware of the harmony of this great artist's work, for whom the discipline of painting is, as he said, ordained to delight. The long years he spent in Rome gave him more than a pictorial familiarity with the classical nobility of landscape and columned terraces, wonderfully though they enrich his pictures—in a *Bacchus and Apollo* no less than in the Ashmolean Museum's *Moses in the Waters*. The primal Roman virtues of *gravitas*, *simplicitas*, *pietas* seem in him to have flowered anew, and the coldness some complain of is not the absence of passion but its sublimation. Order, a sustained intelligence and a marvellous sense of design; if these are the qualities of classicism, then Poussin is indeed the classical painter *par excellence*. But so by this standard is Cézanne, for, as he himself

acknowledged, he found in Poussin that ideal of an abstraction from mere narration and of submitting the thing seen to the government of the intelligence which the artist must always be seeking.

M. Germain Bazin remarks that Poussin is 'the inheritor of Thomism and the precursor of Matisse'. The claim is not as improbable as it must seem when uttered as a mere generalization. The Louvre exhibition enables one to see the lucid intellect at work, illuminating the pastoral lyricism of *Echo and Narcissus* or the wonderful *Wounded Tancred* from Leningrad, giving their special depth and delight to the religious paintings above all (of which we in this country have such wonderful examples, both at Dulwich and especially at Edinburgh, where the Ellesmere *Seven Sacraments* are on permanent loan).

The severity of Poussin's response to sacred themes has too easily been catalogued as a Jansenistic mistrust of created good. Nothing could be more false, for in his religious pictures he supremely exercises that serene intellectual scrutiny which selects, eliminates, reduces. And yet all is gracious: he finds the harmony of form and colour to match a theme that he has inwardly made his own. That is why the iconography of Poussin's paintings, sacred and profane alike, is such a fascinating subject. The source may be Ovid or Tasso, the accepted biblical story or the hagiographical tradition; but it is wholly absorbed, translated boldly into the personal terms of a painter's vision. And in the religious pictures, whether a Holy Family *à la baignoire* (in which the exquisite grouping of gay children only emphasizes the deep significance of the bath being prepared for the Holy Child, symbol as it is of the redeeming work of baptism) or of a sacrament such as *Confirmation* (in either of the two versions he painted, so senatorial and grave), we are aware of the profound discipline which has applied a meditated wisdom to the astonishing virtuosity with which he shapes his forms.

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## REVIEWS

### Rome and Room Enough

THE palimpsest that is Rome has never lacked readers to decipher what they will in this marvellous, muddled text. For some the ancient and imperial are all: for others the Rome of the Popes, or even the Rome of Cinecittà. The guides indeed are as various as the things you see: the fallen column, the baroque statue or the brash new flats. For each its interpreter; and the pattern continues to grow.

M. Emile Mâle, whose *Early Churches of Rome*<sup>1</sup> (originally published in 1942) now appears in an English version, with over a hundred excellent photographs to illustrate a wise and deeply-considered text, was quite sure that the greatest glory of Rome lies in the group of basilicas which evoke the classical virtues of proportion and order as engraced by the Christian

<sup>1</sup> *The Early Churches of Rome*. By Emile Mâle. Translated by David Buxton. 118 photographs. (Ernest Benn; 63s.)