The Problems of the Splendid Century

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A more illuminating exhibition than The Splendid Century is hard to imagine, not only for the richness and variety of the works of art themselves, but for their comprehensive revelation of the spirit and character of seventeenth century France. Visitors cannot but be struck by the profusion of ideas—philosophical as well as stylistic—revealed in the arts of the century. These works compose a variegated fabric, yet this very variety underlines the complex, contradictory aspects of a period that to the French has been immemorially their grand siècle.

The complexity of the century cannot be stressed too strongly, particularly since few important periods in Western history have been so consistently victimized by categorical oversimplification. The English-speaking world, for example, has more often than not been content to accept Voltaire’s title, le siècle de Louis XIV. Its inexactness and immoderation were recently noted in an editorial in The Burlington Magazine on a similar exhibition held in London, which bore the disapproving title “The Century of Louis XIV?”

In art history the period has also been glimpsed as part of that magical if vague landscape lovingly known as the Age of the Baroque. Rich in associations with Rubens, Bernini, and Milton, this phrase if applied to the work of Poussin may seem perplexing. It is an unsafe label; a distinguished art historian has cautioned: “We art historians may claim, on the basis of seniority, a right to tell our colleagues . . . . something about the Baroque as a stylistic term . . . . We were the first to use the term but we were also the first to make a mess of it. What is more, we have passed the mess on to other disciplines.”

Another notion of the century centers in the concept of the honnête homme—the man of sense, scholarship, and integrity. Again, however, the

Fig. 1. Jean-Baptiste Colbert, by Philippe de Champaigne (1602-1674). French, 1655. Oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 28 3/4 inches
Gift of the Wildenstein Foundation, Inc., 1951
epithet is frequently applied carelessly; when we use it, as we often do, to describe men like Descartes or Poussin, we use its eighteenth century meaning, Voltaire's meaning with respect to the international community of men of probity. Harold Nicolson’s scintillating history of manners reminds us that it had a different sense at Louis XIV’s Versailles: the Grande Mademoiselle could characterize the King of Portugal as an honnête homme although she had just described in some detail the baseness of his nature and the debauchery of his conduct.

Within limits, easy generalizations are certainly useful; but the complexities that vitiate them may prove the real source of enjoyment and edification for visitors to the exhibition.

Historians customarily divide the century into two parts. The first, which might be called the Age of Richelieu, is identified with the international ascendancy of France and the development of internal stability and prosperity in terms of a centralized state. The second, the proper Age of Louis XIV, begins in 1661 when the young king upon the death of Mazarin assumed the reins of state. It is symbolized by the autocratic magnificence of Versailles. The two have in common that awareness of national destiny which has ever since been dear to French minds; it is a fateful dream which was rather explicitly spelled out by Richelieu in his political testament: “I promised the king [Louis XIII] to employ all of my energies and all of the authority which he was pleased to give me to ruin the Protestant faction, to humble the pride of the nobility, to reduce each of his subjects in his service and again to raise his name among nations to the heights which it deserved.” Ironically, all these conditions were fulfilled in the reign of Louis XIV, but in ways that eventually proved irreparably harmful to France.

Except for this fundamental ideology, the century in France appears deeply divided. The
first part of it is notable for an extraordinary flowering of vital, individualistic talents: in painting, it is the age of La Tour, Le Nain, Poussin, and Claude; in literature, of Corneille; in philosophy and religion, of Descartes and Pascal. In the second half of the century, while a variety of intellectual currents are still apparent, they are minimized by the interests of the state absolute; the independent tendencies of the Age of Richelieu appear to be succeeded by querulous factionalism. To speak of seventeenth century France is to speak of two different cultures that shared a century. In their differences we may find the key to the abrupt dissimilarity between French painting before and after the death of Poussin.

The prime cultural force in the Age of Richelieu was the bourgeoisie. Although Poussin, the Le Nains, and Philippe de Champaigne worked on occasion for court and church, the greatest number of their clients, members of the bourgeoisie, could only be considered "unofficial."

The romances of Alexandre Dumas have peopled our imaginative picture of the reign of Louis XIII with swashbuckling musketeers and intriguing courtiers—types, to be sure, very much in evidence—but French civilization of the period was centered in the imposing figures of the middle-class businessman and civil servant (see Figure 1). Richelieu must be credited with the rise to power of the bourgeoisie. Since his grand design for France called for the elimination of the nobility as a source of political dissension, he entrusted the administration of government to members of the middle class, men whose loyalty to the crown was ensured by pride of position and the innumerable venal opportunities civil service offered them. Rich-
elieu's plans for expansion required continual financing and refinancing. The expenses of the state could not be met by the tax revenues produced by a primarily agrarian economy from which the nobility, with their fixed and tax-exempt rentes, drew their wealth. Thus considerable power fell into the hands of the money merchants, men like the banker Lumague, who lent money to the state at exorbitant interest. Finally, the elimination of the Protestant state within a state, culminating in the seizure of the Huguenot stronghold at La Rochelle in 1628, dispersed into French society an industrious and ambitious minority whose religion sanctioned their business ambitions.

A large number of the bourgeoisie, as their fortunes grew, became avid collectors; the greatest of them was certainly Nicolas Fouquet, who made considerable advances both in the science of shady financial manipulation and in the art of collecting. Fouquet's lavish château, Vaux-le-Vicomte, assuredly gave impetus to Louis XIV's plans to enlarge Versailles on a grand and luxurious scale. After Fouquet's disgrace, the king was pleased to take over for his own service the exceptional team of artists, including the painter Le Brun and the master landscape gardener Le Nôtre, that Fouquet had assembled. The bourgeoisie of Paris set their stamp on a golden age of acquisition. The English diarist John Evelyn, who visited Paris in 1659, reported an incredible variety of collections: insects, bronzes, medals, and books. But these cannot be taken merely as socially respectable outlets for accumulated wealth. In painting, they often reflect a taste that avoids the ostentation we might expect from a newly arrived class, a taste mirrored in the works of Poussin, Louis Le Nain and his followers, and Claude.

The early years of the century had seen a considerable modification in French taste. Under the influence of Malherbe, the favorite poet of Henri IV, French literature turned from the ambiguous conceits of the sixteenth century and favored a simpler and more direct idiom. On another front, the aristocratic salons of the Marquise de Rambouillet, begun in 1616 out of an aversion to what Nicolson calls "the brisk and dirty carnality of the court of Henri IV," had evolved a type of polite society whose major art was conversation, and which embellished itself with physical and intellectual surroundings of great delicacy and sensitivity. It was in such a setting that Corneille is supposed to have met and conversed with Richelieu. Both trends reflect a tendency to rid thought and society of what might be called the mannerist remnants of medievalism. It is a tendency reflected in England in Evelyn's diary entry for November 26, 1661: "I saw Hamlet Prince of Denmark played, but now the old plays began to disgust this refined age." This concern with "refinement" is most completely expressed in the Age of Louis XIV, but its early appearance is worth noting. It is luminously mirrored in our Angelica and Medor (Figure 2), painted around 1630 by Jacques Blanchard, which seems to capture the idyllic quality of the game of love that preoccupied the Salon de Rambouillet and its successors.

The pre-eminent attitude of the age, however, is not so much that of the salons as it is the sober and reflective state of mind, generally associated with the bourgeoisie, that underlies the full and stately development of French classicism in all areas of intellectual life. Certain qualities of thought seem to characterize this development. While one cannot claim that Poussin, Philippe de Champaigne, and the painters of the Le Nain tradition share a view of life and art traceable to a common philosophy, one cannot deny that their paintings reveal a certain community of spirit that transcends differences of technique, artistic background, and subject matter. Even a decorative work, such as Laurent de La Hyre's Allegory of Music (Figure 3), despite its light and pleasant tone aligns itself in mood with this lofty company.

The common characteristic of these painters appears to be a high reflective seriousness that avoids the pompous and the sanctimonious. It is a sense of classic sobriety and moderation found equally in pictures of the humble peasantry (see Figure 4) and in Poussin's epic recreations of classical antiquity (see Figure 6), not to mention Philippe de Champaigne's moving portraits of the pious leaders of the convent at Port-Royal. In addition, an emotional and psychological self-containment reinforces their
intellectual appeal. In today’s sociological parlance they might be described as “inner-directed,” for they seem remarkably free of artifice or mere virtuosity.

This pervasive sobriety, dignity, and self-sufficiency appears to be the distinguishing quality that makes the flowering of French classicism a unique interval in European history. It separates the painters of the Le Nain school from their contemporaries elsewhere in Europe, who at about the same time were painting scenes from low life showing the peasant or gypsy as an object of humor or scorn—an attitude current since the Reformation. Where Ostade dwells on boorishness, and Velazquez and Murillo treat such scenes with affectionate jocularity, the Le Nains confer upon their humble subjects an uncommon dignity. Not surprisingly, the Le Nains were rescued from obscurity around 1848 by Champfleury, a critic whose enthusiasm for the sociopolitical causes of his time was as keen as his concern for the history of art: “They liked the poor, preferred to paint them rather than the powerful, had the aspirations of a La Bruyère for the fields, were not afraid of the baseness of their subject matter, found men in breeches more interesting than courtiers in lace, fled academic teachings in order to put their own sensations better on canvas.”

The existence of a great many paintings by the Le Nains and their followers presupposes a widespread taste for the type around 1640. Its sources, however, are veiled. No direct parallel exists in the literature of the time; there is no pre-Enlightenment Rousseau from whom to quote chapter and verse. The influence of the picaresque novel, which stimulated interest in rural types and characters, has not, however, been properly studied; it may be here that an adequate literary parallel is to be found. In a general way, these paintings seem to reflect the increased social responsibility that appears as part of the moral pattern of the Age of Richelieu. The efforts of Saint Vincent de Paul, who died in 1660, for a while channeled some of the Church’s energies into a rehabilitation of its neglected social responsibilities, particularly among the lower orders of the clergy concerned with the welfare of the peasantry. Saint Vincent’s teachings also awakened a sense of vocation in society at large; the guilds operated affiliated religious organizations and actively supported hospitals and orphanages.

Behind this consciousness of social obligation, which the Le Nains perhaps reflect, lies the panorama of ideas produced by the profound philosophical re-evaluations of the seventeenth century. The “scientific revolution” had seriously disturbed traditional ideas about the human condition. France and Frenchmen played central roles in implementing the intellectual upheaval. In painting, this found expression in the work of Poussin and Philippe de Champagne, whose artistic efforts seem to characterize two of the major spiritual crises of the century: that of rationalism and that of religion.

The writings of René Descartes and the paintings of Poussin epitomize French rationalism in the Age of Richelieu. Both men did their greatest work outside France, Descartes in Holland and Sweden, Poussin in Rome; the intense factionalism fundamental to French intellectual life was alien to their reflective spirits. Descartes was continually exposed to the attacks of the theological faculty at Louvain, and Poussin’s unhappy experience with the intrigues of Vouet rendered his trip to Paris in 1640-1642 a personal and artistic failure.

Both men were concerned with “sane and intelligent” conduct in life and art. Descartes’s description of his ideal reader approximates the impression we form of Poussin from reading his letters. “I would advise none to read this work,” writes Descartes in the preface to his Meditations, “except such as are able and willing to meditate with me in earnest, to detach their minds from commerce with the senses, and likewise to free themselves from all prejudice.”

Sane and intelligent conduct resolves itself into principles of clarity and logic, dispensed with a straightforwardness of expression that has undeniable power. Poussin’s painting has a quality of “honesty” akin to Descartes’s prose: not a naive adherence to realistic truth, but rather the product of the most rigorous intellectual and emotional self-control. It is this integrity that makes Poussin unique—as it does Corneille among the mass of classical or classicizing artists who derived their forms from the pre-
cepts of antiquity. As Sir Joshua Reynolds noted, it is an integrity that arises first of all from a certain state of mind: "He studied the ancients so much that he acquired a habit of thinking in their way . . . . In antique subjects, the mind is thrown back to antiquity, and nothing may be introduced that may tend to awaken it from the illusion."

Poussin's stoical self-sufficiency and austerity seems to find a spiritual counterpart in the religious painting of Philippe de Champaigne; both artists have a modesty and directness that set their work apart from the oratorical character of much contemporary painting. Much of Philippe de Champaigne's work was directly inspired by the Jansenist movement and the answers it offered to the religious uncertainty of the time.

In France, the Church was for many unable to answer the rationalistic threat to faith. In general, institutional religion was in eclipse; it was subservient to the throne and had been discredited politically by the Peace of Westphalia, which for the first time in centuries had settled the political difficulties of Europe without recourse to Rome. The utilitarian, expedient practices of the Jesuits had resulted in a flexible morality—formalized in the doctrine of probabilism—that did not satisfy an age challenged by the uncompromising premises of rational inquiry. A spiritual vacuum existed which a number of new movements sought to assuage.

Fig. 4. The Baker's Cart, by Jean Michelin (about 1616-1670). French, 1656. Oil on canvas, 38 3/4 x 49 3/4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 1927
Fig. 5. Mère Agnes Arnauld, by Philippe de Champaigne. French. Oil on canvas, 29 1/2 x 23 1/4 inches
Musée National, Versailles
The most important among these movements was Jansenism.

Basically it was an evangelical, pietistic reform that had originated in the Netherlands and that drew its fundamental premises, in the traditional manner of reforms, from the writings of Saint Augustine. It derived its appeal in France from the inflexible strength of its basic moral tenet that the fulfillment of the human spirit's potential could be achieved only by total submission to God. (At about the same time, Corneille was proclaiming the necessity of submission, substituting moral duty for the love of God.) The Jansenist approach is graphically expressed in Philippe de Champaigne's portrait of Mère Agnes Arnauld (Figure 5), the abbess of the movement's stronghold at Port-Royal. The portrait is perhaps a study for the larger painting which the artist executed in grateful commemoration of the miraculous cure of his own daughter, who was a nun at Port-Royal. It fully captures the abbess's devout submission, and at the same time evokes from her features an impression of inner strength as serene and robust as any we find in Poussin's epic heroes. Moreover, the style reflects what one historian has called "the cool and critical character of French religious thought at the time."

Whether Philippe de Champaigne and Poussin would have agreed in matters of philosophical persuasion is an open question. It seems, however, that both are after the same effect, sought though it may be in different ways. Many of the great men of the Age of Richelieu might have differed with each other, but beyond their differences can be seen a similarity of purpose: to create a renewed dignity for man in a mechanical universe of which he is a minuscule part. Pascal disapproved of the self-sufficiency of Cartesian rationalism, but he admitted that if man was a weak and bending reed, he was nevertheless a thinking reed, and when Pascal writes of "the whole soul to which men belong," he echoes the pantheism of Descartes.

The forms that the quest for spiritual certainty took in the first part of the great century have a common moderation, regularity, and control—qualities highly esteemed in an age which had risen out of chaos and irruption and which sought above all Pascal's "peace, the sovereign good." The transformation of these ideals under Louis XIV is an interesting, at times paradoxical phenomenon.

The over-all impression of Louis XIV's France is of a massive ensemble, carefully planned and skillfully decorated. At the center is the king, the enigmas of whose character history has been unable to solve. Louis XIV understood the business of being king perhaps better than any other man who ever lived; certainly the effect of his presence upon otherwise intelligent people caused them to lapse into adoring gibberish of the most nonsensical kind, and this is a tribute to the skill with which he put across his kingly posture. Undoubtedly handsome and in many ways accomplished, his reputation in history has not been entirely happy. No man save perhaps Richelieu and Napoleon has been more conscious of the ecumenical destiny of France—to Louis XIV identical with his own destiny—yet none did so much to thwart the heroic dream. It is axiomatic that logic carried to extremes becomes illogical. Perhaps that is why, for all the magnificence of Versailles, the Age of Louis XIV is artistically less satisfactory than we might expect.

The present exhibition gives no impression of the cumulative splendor of Versailles, but even those who know Versailles may feel that Le Brun, Coypel, and Mignard are hardly names to put in the same company with Poussin, Claude, and La Tour. A real artistic decline appears to have set in. Any number of reasons may be given; a few come immediately to mind.

It has been plausibly argued that France was generally barren of painters of the first genius in the second part of the great century. Le Brun was an artist of great natural competence, as were Mignard and Girardon. Claude of course continued to work in Rome until his death in 1682, but within the boundaries of France proper no artist attained his level of achievement. This situation in fact appears to be the case throughout Europe; after the death of Murillo in the same year as Claude, Spain did not produce a painter of real consequence until Goya. In Holland the death of Vermeer began a caesura that lasted until Van Gogh. The same is true of Belgium, and in England the promising beginning of Lely waited two generations for
Reynolds and Gainsborough. In the face of this depressing evidence the achievements of France appear truly remarkable. If we set aside the question of talent, however, and examine the character of French civilization at this time, other factors claim our attention—particularly that of the state and its control of the arts.

In the brilliant scheme for France that grew in the mind of Colbert, the arts, as well as industry, religion, and literature, figured in a clearly defined role. Louis XIV, in an address to the French Academy, placed in its hands the task of propagating his glory; the arts were given the same charge (see Figure 7). State control had not been too much in evidence under Richelieu, although the great Cardinal had persecuted Corneille through the oracles of the French Academy, and Rubens reported in a letter that one of his decorations in the Luxembourg, in a series celebrating the doubtful glories of the life of Marie de Médicis, had disturbed Richelieu lest it cast discredit on the royal family. Perhaps the most ominous portent was voiced by Richelieu’s adoring deputy, Sublet de Noyers, who was responsible for bringing Poussin to Paris to work for Louis XIII. Writing to Poussin’s friend Chanteloup, De Noyers set forth his displeasure at the artist’s diffidence: “Make use of this occasion to catch M. Poussin’s ear and tell him that if he does not love his country, he might at least defer to the nation which at the moment produces the finest part of all that is best in Europe . . . . M. Poussin will also be reminded (by another person) that kings have long arms and that it will be extremely difficult to escape feeling that a great king such as ours will not have injured feelings when confronted with a man born his subject who has not kept his word.” De Noyers’s inquisitorial attitude was, nevertheless, exceptional; movements independent of king and court flourished at the very heart of French culture and were supported.

Fig. 6. *Landscape with Diogenes*, by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). French, 1648. Oil on canvas, 63 x 87 inches. Musée du Louvre

![Image of Landscape with Diogenes](image-url)
by an independent patronage able to compete financially with the state.

With the accession of Louis XIV and the rise of Colbert, times changed. Under Colbert the state achieved a virtual monopoly. It has been estimated that during Colbert’s tenure—he died in 1683—the revenues of the state increased two hundredfold. His efficient reform of administrative malpractice and his reduction of the exorbitant interest paid by the state to the money merchants were responsible for much of this. In addition, he removed from the rolls of exemptions a great many people (primarily among the nobility) who had hitherto enjoyed exceptional status. The notarial documents of the period, now on file in Paris, show many lordly and fashionable names balanced precariously on the edge of bankruptcy. In economic terms—by weakening his competitors as well as increasing his revenues—Colbert thus created a monopoly of demand. With the Academy he created a monopoly of supply.

As Charles Le Brun rose in favor, he brought the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture, of which he was director, to new importance. Originally founded to compete with the craft guilds of Paris, it had evolved, as academies will, into a forum for theoretical discussion. Under Colbert the Academy was very much a part of the state cultural machine; its pronouncements took on the character of aesthetic legislation. Following the established traditions of humanistic theories of art, these pronouncements developed along markedly classicist lines. Raphael and Poussin were extolled as artistic exemplars, history painting was recognized as the highest form of that art, and considerable attention was given to questions of decorum, scholarship, and the ancient argument of drawing versus color. The Royal Academy was
affected by national policy: as part of the systematic persecution of the Protestants, painters were expelled from it for their religion, and in 1690 the writer Furetière was expelled from the French Academy for infringing on that body's monopoly of dictionary making. The existence of such an academy must, by virtue of its doctrinaire character, be considered an inhibiting force. It was, however, merely a symptom of the general spiritual aridity that prevailed in French life, particularly after the death of Colbert.

Louis XIV took many ideas for Versailles from Fouquet's Vaux, thereby following the lead of a member of the bourgeoisie. This is one thing in matters of architecture; on the other hand, it is surprising to discover that the society of his court, which set an example not only for France but for aristocratic society throughout Europe—thus succeeding Spain in social as well as political eminence—may be described as essentially "middle-class," in the modern connotation of that phrase. Many of the members of the court were not of noble birth, and acquired their aristocratic privilege and position through letters patent. Although many of them no doubt were men and women of integrity, most appear to have shared the view of Molière's bourgeois gentilhomme, M. Jourdain, "with his fantastic notions of gentility and gallantry": "If I hang around the gentry I show my good taste. It's better than hanging around with your shopkeeping crowd." Molière's ungentle sarcasm was founded on his scorn of the irrationality of courtly standards; he was already thirty-nine when Louis XIV came to power and his convictions had been formed in the bracing atmosphere of the preceding generation. There is no reason to doubt the credibility of Molière's characters; even so disillusioned and embittered a man as Saint-Simon could write with admiration of the King's ability to vary the tipping of his hat in accordance with the degree of recognition an individual's status at court demanded. Achievement was measured in terms of courtly values; courtly values were based on such trivial symbols. Artistic accomplishments were all too often considered as polite accouterments—hence Jourdain's astonishment at the discovery that all his life he had been speaking prose, which he had been informed was a necessary attribute of a member of polite society. The court at Versailles was not only the forerunner of the brilliant aristocratic society of the eighteenth century but may be accorded an ancestral connection with the modern country club.

In the Academy and at court the emphasis was placed on rules. It was an emphasis inherited to a great degree from the concern with regulation of the preceding age. But we cannot help feeling that the Age of Louis XIV took over this body of precepts without really taking over the substance which gave them meaning.

Artistically, this is seen in Le Brun's sketch for a decoration commemorating the conquest of Ghent (Figure 8). One cannot help feeling that Le Brun is caught between two stools: on one side Rubens and on the other Poussin. A fully baroque style and a fully classical style do not intermingle easily, but Le Brun, to his credit, has attempted something of this sort of synthesis. The return to a baroque idiom is understandable. Although the preceding generation had more or less tacitly ignored Rubens' decorations in the Luxembourg in deference to the prevailing classical taste, it would be difficult to imagine a style temperamentally and technically more suitable to the glorification of the Sun King. In that connection, Bernini's bust of Louis XIV is perhaps the most satisfactory image of the king, for its pyrotechnics capture not only his features but something of the monarch's celestial view of himself. Le Brun was astute and recognized this. On the other hand, his intellectual preference for classical principles restrained him from openly following the ebullient example of Rubens. The result is a style without the inner logic and integrity of either Rubens or Poussin. Sir Kenneth Clark has written of Poussin that his influence was almost entirely beneficial, for he created a style that made decent painters out of artists like Gaspard Dughet and Francisque Millet; Le Brun's example forces us to qualify Sir Kenneth's generous estimate, because Poussin also endowed the succeeding generation with a set of rules effective rhetorically but insubstantial without the benefit of his special qualities of mind and imagination.

In the Age of Louis XIV, therefore, we discover a certain lack of internal direction com-
pensated by the external splendor of the state. It is a glittering whole; an examination close-to reveals a little tarnish. It is reported that when the king lay dying, the courtiers scurried back and forth, in time with the rise and fall of his condition, between the royal bedchamber and the apartment of the Duke of Orleans, destined to become regent; this picture is historically appealing because it portrays, more vividly than any other, a society of people moving not merely from one set of rooms to another at Versailles but from one era to another. As long as the king lived, no truly aristocratic society with its full implications of birthright exclusiveness and arrogance could come into being, for service at the Versailles of Louis XIV was a sycophantic game at which the noblesse de robe was fully as adept as the noblesse de race. Toward the end of the reign, the theoreticians had made considerable progress in effecting a compromise between genius and the rules; the animadversion of the birthright nobility for the court arriviistes developed into an independent aristocratic taste that resulted in a more intimate, polite style.

Through the works of art in the current exhibition, therefore, we may look back to an interesting, extraordinary, and crucial age. History points forward as well as backward, and if we look to the eighteenth century and keep in mind the two parts of the seventeenth, we do well to remember that to art historians the eighteenth century is the Age of the Rococo, while to the historian of ideas it is the Age of Enlightenment. Thus if the promise of the Age of Richelieu does not perhaps find the immediate completion we would wish in the Age of Louis XIV, it is in time fulfilled and history and ourselves are enriched for the waiting.

Fig. 8. Allegory of the Capture of Ghent by Louis XIV in 1678, by Charles Le Brun (1619-1690). French, about 1680. Oil on canvas, 23 3/4 × 41 3/4 inches

Musée de Troyes