THE RAPE OF THE SABINE WOMEN
BY NICOLAS POUSSIN

BY JANE COSTELLO

The Rape of the Sabine Women recently acquired by the Metropolitan Museum is one of two versions of the subject by Poussin. The earlier—one, according to Poussin’s friend and biographer Bellori, for Cardinal Luigi Omodei—is now in the Louvre. Its style dates it between 1633 and 1635. The Museum’s picture Félibien lists among works painted before 1637. By 1685, the time when he was writing, it had belonged to the Duchess of Aguillon (Richelieu’s niece) and had come into the possession of M. de la Ravoir. After Félibien’s time it passed through several collections and was until recently in the Cook collection, Richmond, from which the Museum acquired it. There are four drawings for the two paintings; three are sketches for the first version (at Chatsworth; the Uffizi, Florence; and Windsor), a fourth for the second version (also at Windsor).

As we look at this painting today, its beauty and craftsmanship move us, as they have moved others for three centuries. The turbulence of the figures, the grandeur of the landscape, and the brilliance and subtle variety of the color are as immediately striking now as they have ever been. Yet the whole complex life which produced it, and for which it was intended, has long since passed. We are no longer able to contemplate it with the understanding of the seventeenth century, and so inevitably some of its import is hidden from us. Correspondingly our pleasure in the painting and our judgment of it are incomplete. We must return in thought to Poussin’s time, to the aims in his mind as he worked on the picture and the associations it may have evoked in those who saw it.

The story of the abduction of the Sabine women by the Romans has meaning for us, of course, as a historical legend, just as it had for the seventeenth century (or the later Romans themselves). One is curious to know the early struggles of the city which was one day to rule the civilized world. In the later sixteenth century whole series of scenes of the heroic days of early Rome, often including the legend of the Sabines, were painted in Italian palaces. Luca Cambiaso, for instance, had decorated the Palace of the Alessi in Genoa with such paintings and the Carracci the Fava Palace in Bologna. But in the seventeenth century the story called to mind other associations.

To a man or woman of Poussin’s time his painting might have suggested connotations of marriage. For a century or more, beginning about 1450, the Rape of the Sabine Women and the subsequent Reconciliation of the Sabines and Romans had been among the themes relating to marriage painted on the cassoni made as wedding chests for Italian brides. Other stories often occurring with them were: the story of Scipio, who restored a captured bride to her parents and bridegroom, and the story of Polyxena, who was sacrificed on the tomb of her former betrothed, Achilles. The traditional implications of these legends still held in Poussin’s time. Shortly after Poussin came to Rome, Pietro da Cortona made two celebrated paintings for the noble family of
The Rape of the Sabine Women, by Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665). Recently acquired by the Museum. Dick Fund, 1946. A detail of the painting is reproduced in color on the cover.
Poussin's first version of the Rape of the Sabine Women. In the Louvre, Paris
Sacchetti which repeated cassone themes, the Rape of the Sabine Women and the Sacrifice of Polyeuxena (now in the Capitoline Museum).

A chief center of the production of the cassoni was Tuscany, and, as his name indicates, Pietro da Cortona was a Tuscan. In his choice of these two subjects Pietro followed the popular tradition of his native region. In Tuscany, too, the most famous single sculpture of the Sabines had been made, Giambologna’s group of 1583, standing then as now in the Loggia dei Lanzi, in Florence. It is said that in making these figures Giambologna had not intended to represent any particular story, but the group was soon baptized the Rape of the Sabine Women and as such was greatly renowned throughout Italy and elsewhere in Europe.

Certainly every connoisseur in Rome knew Giambologna’s Sabines, just as he knew Pietro da Cortona’s painting. The subject was probably suggested to Poussin by Pietro’s picture, and he used Giambologna’s sculpture in composing the couples at the left of his own painting. But in Poussin’s Sabine Women these influences originating in Tuscany are combined with impressions of the classical antiquities of Rome. The group to the right is based on the well-known Hellenistic sculpture, the Ludovisi Gaul (Terme Museum), one of the rather rare instances of Poussin’s deriving figures directly from a specific ancient work.

At the time the picture was painted Poussin had been in Rome since 1624, some twelve or thirteen years. Throughout these years, and even before, while he was still in Paris, his mind and imagination had been held by the beauty and grandeur of classical antiquity. He was attracted by the fantasies of Roman mythology, the heroic events of Roman history. In his paintings of these subjects he tried to bring to life the people and scenes which he saw carved on the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius, on the Arch of Titus, and on Roman reliefs, coins, and gems, or painted in what few examples of Roman painting were available to him. And always he read faithfully the writings of the ancient authors.

In beginning work on the Rape of the Sabine Women he turned to the writings of the ancient historians Livy and Plutarch. Both record memories of Rome as an upstart community bordering on the territories of older, long-established peoples. To further its hasty growth the recently founded city had granted sanctuary to the rabble and outcasts of other towns. While this brought about an immediate increase of population, the permanence of the city was endangered by the absence of women. Romulus therefore sent envoys to the men of neighboring villages and towns, asking them for their daughters in marriage. On every side his request was refused, at times with unflattering advice. After this disappointment Romulus arranged a stratagem through which the Romans might take their wives by force. He had it noised about that an altar to the god Consus (Neptunus Equestris) had been discovered in Rome and that a splendid celebration, the Consualia, was to be held, with sacrifices and games. The neighboring people flocked into Rome, curious to see the new city and eager to participate in the festivities, among them the Sabines, who came with their wives and children. Romulus sat in front at the games, among the chief men of the city, clad in purple. The Romans waited, their eyes upon him, their swords ready. As had been agreed, Romulus arose, folded back his mantle, and then threw it around him again. At this sign each Roman seized a Sabine girl and carried her off. Married women were not molested, except one, Hersilia, who was taken by mistake, and the Sabine men were permitted to escape unharmed. When these had fled and quiet returned, Romulus addressed the maidens, promising them courteous treatment, marriage, citizenship, and partnership in property and children. The Romans, meanwhile, did their best to be ingratiating, and gradually the anger of the brides subsided. They settled down to their new lives as Roman matrons and, a year later, when the Sabines were fighting the Romans, brought about a reconciliation between the two peoples.

In general plan the two versions of the Sabine Women are, of course, much alike, as Poussin carefully followed the same ancient texts in both. The action takes place in a large square in ancient Rome, as Poussin imagined.
it. Romulus, accompanied by two of his chief men, surveys the scene from a position high on the left (as Pietro da Cortona and the Carracci had also placed him) and holds out his cloak. Below we see the violent action touched off by his signal. The plan in both pictures also emphasizes the groups exemplifying the three major outrages occasioned by the abduction: the seizure of young women by force, the bereavement of the families, and the violation of parental rights.

In detail, however, there are fundamental differences in composition. During the two or three years before he painted the second version Poussin had been continuously evolving his theories on the manner in which a story should be presented and altering and perfecting his style to suit his aims. Having already painted a Rape of the Sabine Women for Cardinal Omodei, he could now, a few years later, review his earlier thoughts on the subject with a judgment formed by later experiences.

By altering and stressing certain features in the second painting Poussin has recorded his second thoughts on the story and, even more, his intentions as a painter at this point in his career. In order to understand them we must inquire carefully into these changes in the figures and setting, almost as the French Academicians LeBrun or Bourdon would have done when they interpreted works by Raphael, Titian, and Poussin in one of their sessions in the Louvre.

Perhaps the most noticeable change in the second painting is in the setting. In the earlier one, which Poussin intended to be an authentic portrait of a square in the new city, probably the forum, the background is solidly lined with imposing buildings. Facing us is a temple. Its columns are widely spaced, the central span being largest of all. The capitals of the columns and the moldings of the pediment and entablature are in the simple style of the Tuscan order, traditionally believed to be the indigenous style of Tuscany and Rome. By these signs we are meant to recognize the temple as one of appropriately early Roman type. But more than that, the six columns and the niches behind them show that Poussin was thinking of the Capitoline temple, as he knew it from Roman coins of Domitian and Vespasian. That the city was newly founded is shown by the tower still under construction. The grandeur of the scene was probably justified in Poussin's mind by Livy's statement that Romulus had caused the city to be built not for present but for future needs. In the general arrangement of the buildings he was indebted to Serlio, a mid-sixteenth-century architectural writer. Serlio's book illustration for the theater setting for a tragic play determined the perspective view down the street and the double-storied buildings in the painting.

In the later painting Poussin began afresh and based his setting on an ancient and unimpeachably authentic source, Vitruvius. Upon opening one of the sixteenth- or seventeenth-century editions of Vitruvius, he no doubt found the passage which speaks of the Roman custom of holding games in the forum and goes on to describe the buildings adjoining it, beginning with the basilica. This description suited his need exactly. He could locate the games of the Consualia in the forum, confident that his arrangement corresponded to the true circumstances of classical antiquity, and identify it with a basilica. In the second version of the Sabine Women, therefore, we look across the forum to the basilica. It is built with a high central hall with flat roofs and balconies over the side aisles, as Vitruvius indicated. The details of the building Poussin filled in for himself, guided by illustrations in sixteenth-century architectural books whose interpretations of ancient monuments he trusted. Details from Serlio's book illustration of a city gate and Cesariano's of the Basilica of Fano probably contributed to the building in the picture.

In changing the setting Poussin wished to conform more closely to his aim of historical accuracy. Toward this same end he reinterpreted parts of the story itself. In the time between making the two pictures he realized that the Consualia was a religious celebration, and he therefore changed the architectural setting of Romulus. The fluted columns between which Romulus stands were not in the first version. Instead, the wall of a building ap-
peared behind the podium. Both possibilities had occurred to Poussin before making either painting, as we know from his preliminary sketch at Chatsworth. After rejecting the columns in the first painting, in the second he returned to them. The reason is clear: the two columns mean that Romulus is standing before a temple and reinforce the religious implications of the occasion. Pietro da Cortona had also placed Romulus at the left between two columns of a temple and identified it by a statue of Neptune. Though Poussin omitted the statue, it is probably a temple of Neptune (Consus) he wished to show.

Since Romulus now officiates from a temple it would be logical to think that he is shown here in his capacity of pontifex maximus. In the Louvre version he appears in the armor of a Roman officer and wears a kingly crown (the pose and type are based on Roman allocutio scenes, showing the emperor addressing the populace). The Romulus of the second painting, on the other hand, is dressed in tunic and mantle, with a ribbon tied around his head, the ends brought forward over his shoulders. In his hand he holds a long wand. This is not, however, the costume of a priest, and we cannot be certain of Poussin’s intention.

These alterations in the top part of the picture allowed Poussin to include an idea which had also occurred to him in planning the first version—a landscape in the distance, with a view of the Capitoline. He has painted it, following the fragments of description in Livy and Plutarch, as the citadel guarding Rome, wooded and rocky—perhaps with the intention of calling to mind that not long after the feast of the Consualia a girl, Tarpeia, betrayed this stronghold to the vengeful Sabines.

One other reinterpretation of the story stands out. Poussin has introduced two small children into the scene of abduction, one of which looks up at the woman being carried off to the left and cries out to her, obviously its mother. Livy had explained that the Sabines came as families, but it is clear from Plutarch that the Romans were careful to abduct only young maidens. Poussin undoubtedly intended the woman in the left foreground to be Hersilia, the married woman who was carried off by mistake and who is said later to have become the wife of Romulus. Like the columns and the landscape, this was not a new idea, for a child had been shown in his early sketch.

Other changes in the second painting were not concerned with Poussin’s aim to reconstruct the classical past; nor were they features he had previously considered and discarded. These touch the manner in which the painted actors are made to behave.

Poussin has changed the emotional response and action of the old nurse who kneels on the pavement. In the earlier painting she faced Romulus, pointing to a girl being carried off as if asking for clemency. In the second version she strikes her clenched fist to her head in anguish, looks after the mother, and motions to the child as if despairing of its welfare. She behaves less like a woman of heroic legend but more like one whose life had been bounded by the cares of home and nursery, as she is meant to be.

The couple walking into the background in the center are similarly changed. As they appeared in the first painting, the girl still resisted and turned away from her companion. Here, though her ribbons are undone as the result of a struggle, she has begun at least to consider the words of the young Roman. She turns to listen to him and walks easily at his side as he urges her toward the Capitoline. In this couple we see implied the next chapter of the story, the contentment to be found by the Sabines as Roman matrons, a suitable counterpart to the foreground action, which stresses the disaster to the Sabine community.

These changes are small reflections of Poussin’s larger interest in the subtleties of human motivation and behavior. In the Sabine Women, and in fact throughout all but his earliest paintings, this interest makes itself felt. A century and more earlier Leonardo had observed in his notes the variations in appearance typical of good or evil character, of age, or of sex and had advised their appropriate use in paintings. Poussin went beyond this; he wished to penetrate into the mind of man, to analyze the conflicting impulses, emotions, and
A preliminary sketch for the first version of the Rape of the Sabine Women, in which Poussin set down his first thoughts on the story. In the collection of the Duke of Devonshire, Chatsworth

thoughts which go to make up his behavior.

Poussin gave long observation and analysis to these problems. He recognized the passions and reason as parts of every man, and the balance between them marked for him the difference between the noble and ignoble in thought and action. The man of superior character, the honnête homme, holds his strong impulses and emotions in check, governed by his reason. In the less perfect man, passions dominate. For Poussin, too, the virtue of a private person was identical with his character as a citizen, and the problem was therefore a social and ethical one.

This interest in an ideal of conduct Poussin held in common with the great literary and intellectual leaders of his time in France—Corneille, for instance, whose plays were often concerned with the conflict between emotion and the reasoned action demanded by public duty. The titles of two of Descartes's works show the same preoccupation with reason and passion, his Discours de la méthode pour bien conduire sa raison et chercher la vérité dans les sciences and his Traité des passions. The former appeared in 1637, a year after Corneille's first characteristic tragedy, Le Cid, both within the same interval of time in which Poussin made his Sabines. All three were, of course, indebted to the stoical writers of antiquity, Plutarch, Lucan, Epictetus, and Seneca and to those Frenchmen earlier in the century who had read and learned from these classical writers.

In the Rape of the Sabine Women Poussin's ideal of character is exemplified in the figures of Romulus and his two companions. These three men, isolated far above the crowd in rank and position, are equally isolated from it in their conduct. They alone, in all the picture, are given a dignified stillness. Romulus seems
to have paused and to be standing motionless, his arm still outstretched in the act of the signal; for the Romans below him have had time to seize the maidens and drive away their relatives. His gesture is restrained, implying a minimum of movement, whereas the Romulus of the earlier version swung his arm high. The two companions of Romulus are hidden except for their faces, but they betray little or no emotion at this tense moment; one of them, in fact, does not even notice the turmoil. Unlike the men in the earlier painting, who anxiously watched Romulus, these men seem guided by a contemplative wisdom which does not allow for momentary excitement. In them reason is dominant. By contrast the people in the crowd below are driven by violent passions: sorrow and terror in the young women, fear in the fleeing men, despair in the old nurse, and helpless anger in the unarmed father fighting a Roman. Even the lictor is shaken by surprise.

It is characteristic of Poussin's integrity that he held himself as a painter to this same disciplined ideal. All parts of the execution of the Rape of the Sabine Women bespeak a reasoning and deliberate intelligence. It can be perceived, for instance, in the style and composition of the painting.

Poussin has understood the story, in its simplest terms, as a conflict of opposed aims. He has made the conflict visible and used it as the cohesive force in his composition. Escape for the Sabines lies to the right. The men flee in that direction, and the maidens, though they are being forcibly held back, strain to follow them. The Romans seek to reach a goal to the left. The men carrying the girls, the horseman, and the embattled Roman in the foreground all drive in that direction. As the actors pursue their opposed aims their figures form repeated opposed diagonals, running from left and right toward the center of the painting, balancing and holding the whole composition together.

In the center the desolate nurse kneels on the open ground. On either side of her the major groups are set out with the clarity of sculptures. Beyond the nurse a clear area reaches back across the forum, allowing us to estimate the distance across it to the flat façade of the great basilica. The ground plan of the painting is therefore measurable, finite, and clear; the elements of the setting few, large, and simple in form. In this ordered framework the crystalline fury of the passions and movements and the brilliant and varied colors stand forth, bringing to us the excitement of the scene.

The emotions of the figures are communicated through their physical movements. Both are always shown at a high point. Each strong feeling has reached an intensity beyond which it cannot go without losing its identity in a frenzy and from which it has not yet begun to decline. Each movement too is complete and pauses at the moment of its achievement before the beginning of a new and different one. As a result, both emotion and movement appear arrested, as if momentarily hesitating in equilibrium.

The disciplined organization, which had not yet been fully reached in the earlier painting, the sober facial type of the Romulus and his companions, the expressive antique faces of the women, and the smooth, marble-like modeling of the bodies are features belonging to Poussin's paintings of 1637: the Schoolmaster (Louvre) and the Pan and Syrinx (Dresden). Their appearance in the Rape of the Sabine Women marks it as a work of this time. Félibien must have been quite right to list the Sabine Women among works made just before 1637.

With the greatness of his ability Poussin chose and synthesized into a heroic style the influences and ideas which surrounded him in Rome—the art and literature of ancient times, the paintings and traditions then current—and the opinions and theories which he had evolved out of impressions received before 1624, while he was still in France. The classical ideal which he formulated was then original and new. In the French Academy Le Brun and others granted his works a place comparable to Raphael's, while subsequent generations of painters down through David and Cézanne have paid him the tribute of imitation and praise. The Rape of the Sabine Women is a painting embodying those qualities which made Poussin's works a cornerstone of French painting.