

Daniel Gaitan

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Professor Zurawski

Landscape with St. John on Patmos

The *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*, by Nicolas Poussin demonstrates the philosophical and religious changes which shifted the world away from the ancient pagan beliefs and into the future of Christianity. This is shown through the use of artistic techniques and methods used to convey both the old and the new world, the religious symbolism, and through the artists own philosophical values illustrated in the painting. The French artist's depiction of St. John on the island of Patmos is a stoic and calm painting, which conveys a message of, philosophical thought and appreciation of the natural world.

Nicolas Poussin was a revered French painter who was drawn into elite Roman intellectual circles and was a patron of art there in Rome.¹ He lived from 1594 to 1665 and was a premier French painter.² Poussin was born in Normandy, but spent most of his life after 1624 in Rome.³ He used classical and recent myths from Tasso and also being a devout Catholic was inspired by fashionable Jesuit piety.⁴ Poussin was perhaps the most influential French painter whose art was both an eloquent and compelling expression of classicism and ideals.⁵ Many French artists regard him as the founder of the French School of Art, even though for most of his

¹ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page119

² Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page117

³ The Age of Poussin, Richard Mullen

⁴ The Age of Poussin, Richard Mullen

⁵ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page119

working life he lived outside of his native land.⁶ Poussin thought about each painting he created and was an intellectual painter. Poussin's artwork was so renowned that from 1640 to 1642 he was Louis XIII's *premier peintre*.⁷ The *Landscape with St. John on Patmos* represents the changing beliefs about the world he lived, and as an intellectual, gives a glimpse of his mind to the audience viewing the masterwork. The painting was originally commissioned for Gian Maria Roscioli, who was a member of Poussin's small circle of patrons.⁸ The painting may have been sold by Roscioli's brothers or by the Foligno cathedral the recipient of Roscioli's collection; the painting was eventually in France by 1680.⁹

Nicolas Poussin used artistic techniques to convey the paradox and eventual decline of the old pagan beliefs. Precision is exhibited to make the entire painting stoic and serene. The painting is oil on canvas and it is 39(1/2) by 53(5/8) inches to make it look colorful and serene and was created in 1640.¹⁰ Poussin introduced architecture in landscaping by layering and scattering the elements.¹¹ The saint and the ruins are placed exactly where they would add dimension to the painting. There are no unnecessary random objects in the work, and there is also not a void where there is needed another element of contention. Spatial recession that is created by parallel stages that are connected by a series of canted diagonals also increases the scope of the island.¹² It gives enormous depth to the painting and the island of Patmos seems like a never ending fantasy. It seems illogical that mathematical precision would make such a calm and quiet setting. Instead of a stark and pointed painting the landscape is full of harmony.

⁶ The Age of Poussin, Richard Mullen

⁷ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 119

⁸ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 117

⁹ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 117

¹⁰ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 117

¹¹ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

¹² Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

However he used bold clarity to represent serious subject matter by the use of ornamental possibilities that are subordinated to the structure and work itself.¹³ The work is thus not boring and does not have the feeling of being contrived.

The landscape is so vast and extensive in the painting that St. John seems isolated in a strip of foreground.¹⁴ However, this is also what makes it unique from other religious paintings of St. John. St. John had only been painted in much earlier and Italian primitive paintings where the island is too small for him to recline.¹⁵ This is a unique take on the religious genre and on the landscape genre. His Patmos is like a comfortable retreat and has sandy hillocks, some black oaks for shade, and a gorgeous view of the mainland to the left.¹⁶ This makes the painting uniquely his and is an update of the cliché Patmos aisle. The structure of the island also is remarkable for a landscape painting. Poussin used rigorous order on the natural scenery he painted in respect to the island of Patmos.¹⁷ The spatial depth is clearly defined and held by curves that slowly lead the eye from the foreground all the way into the background to enhance the structure.¹⁸ This technique allows the painting to enhance the overall experience and allows the viewers to imagine the scenario taking place and moving in front of their eyes. It seems to overcome the bounds of the painting. Also, carefully composed columns, stones, and fragments of ruins keep the painting both symbolic and landscape very original.¹⁹

¹³ The ideal Classicist: Nicolas Poussin and Nature

¹⁴ Seventeenth Century Art & Architecture Page302

¹⁵ Seventeenth Century Art & Architecture Page 302

¹⁶ Seventeenth Century Art & Architecture Page 302

¹⁷ Art Institute of Chicago, Art Access: Poussin

¹⁸ Art Institute of Chicago, Art Access: Poussin

¹⁹ The Ideal Classicist: Nicolas Poussin and Nature

Light is used by Poussin to illuminate the clarity and order the island exhibits.²⁰ The idealized landscape setting is reminiscent of Carracci and Titian.²¹ The illumination does not hide any of the ruins or even any of St. John from the vantage point seen. This also allows for a painting that is not muddy or shadowy such as a Caravaggio painting, because that would change the mood from harmonious and thoughtful, to a depressed and cold new future of Christendom.

Religious symbolism is used in the *Landscape with St. John on Patmos* to convey the new Christian future filled with reason and thought as opposed to the paganism which was so prevalent in ancient times. The first piece of religious symbolism is St. John. St. John is a prominent individual in the new testament of the Bible and he wrote the apocalyptic book Revelation. In his religious fervor he witnessed the apocalypse in his visions and that is where Revelation was composed.²² It would seem as if an apocalyptic book of the Bible which foretells the end of the world is a contradiction to the overall meaning of the painting, but it is not. It simply illustrates the main point that Christianity will carry the world until the last days and that Christianity reveals the true truth in the universe.

The island of Patmos is also an element of Christian symbolism. The apostle and evangelist was banished to the Aegean island during the reign of Emperor Domitian for spreading the Christian religion.²³ The painting displays a Christian symbol in the setting itself, and John never would have been sent there if pagan beliefs of the elite in Rome would not have reacted poorly to Christianity. This painting shows the Christian beliefs which have not yet

²⁰ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

²¹ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

²² Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

²³ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page 122

occurred in much of the world, and all of nature on the island is calmed as to allow John to write his divine inspiration.

Nicolas Poussin used his various philosophical beliefs to convey the old and new world's changing beliefs from that of paganism to that of Christianity. First of all, the *Landscape with St. John on Patmos* may not have been a single work but part of a pair of paintings. *The Landscape with Saint Matthew* is believed to be its "pendant."²⁴ There are striking similarities between the two pieces such as the men both being evangelists and also the various ruins composed in both. This has led many to wonder if "the original commission probably included all four evangelists" which would explain the low price offered for them.²⁵ However, the use of religious men clearly demonstrates the belief that the world is changing into the Christian future. There are not any philosophical men of the ancient Greek and Roman civilization portrayed such as Aristotle or Plato. The use of such explicit and infamous men would have alluded to a different point celebrating the ancients, contrary to the point being portrayed in the work about the non-Christian past as insignificant.

Throughout the work there is also a Neo- Stoic belief in the Logos, which is a harmony in the natural world governed by the Word or soul of the world.²⁶ He believed in his heart the man and nature are bound together in a harmony. This is shown extensively in the painting of the *Landscape with St. John on Patmos* by the use of the natural landscape balanced together with precision with the St. John. St. John is seated perfectly reclined parallel to the picture plane.²⁷ This does not make him the primary star of the painting but shows the landscape with an

²⁴ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800* Page.119

²⁵ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800* Page.120

²⁶ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page122

²⁷ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page122

extraordinary human who is stoic in thought and appreciating of nature itself. The picture itself also shows nature as a powerful and extensive force capable of destroying all humankind in its awesome power, but instead is silent and calm as to allow St. John to compose his book of Revelation. This balance and genius melody of contemplation shows just how together and dependent humans are upon nature.

The ruins also painted show how the new future of Christianity is reason and thought, and the old was destroyed and insignificant in comparison to the new Christian future, or even in comparison to what John is writing at that very moment. The setting of the masterpiece is an imaginary Greek island which has several Roman architectural monuments.²⁸ Some of the monuments are recognizable such as the Castel Sant' Angelo, while some structures are more difficult to identify.²⁹ The ambiguity of some of the structure may be intentional because it asserts his point that the heathen and pagan beliefs led to the demise and destruction of the old world. It also has a negative connotation about how heathen and immoral beliefs and lifestyles will lead nature to disrupt this harmony with man, and lead to the destruction. This changes when John looks to the future Christian world and nature calms down.

Throughout Nicolas Poussin's *Landscape with St. John on Patmos*, the artistic techniques, religious symbolism, and philosophical beliefs of the artist show how the ancient paganism of the old world is making way for Christianity to take over. Nicolas Poussin was a maverick artist who thought about each component of his painting and created a beautiful and serene landscape. Nicolas Poussin acknowledged the power that Christianity held over both the cultural and political institutions in the world, and made a great painting full of harmony and

²⁸ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*. Page122

²⁹ Art Institute of Chicago. *French and British Paintings from 1600 to 1800*.Page122

inspiration. The harmony is so great that St. John could be taken as a metaphor for Nicolas Poussin himself, with the God-given inspirations.

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Art Institute of Chicago

Nicolas Poussin

Landscape with St. John on Patmos, 1640

Oil on canvas

Picture taken on May 29, 2009

