In spring 2015 the Musée du Louvre is showcasing the art of the seventeenth century with three exhibitions: two at the Louvre itself (“Poussin and God” and “Making Sacred Images”), the third, “Velázquez,” at the Grand Palais. The Louvre’s focus is therefore on the French “grand siècle,” with a new look at its most famous painter, Nicolas Poussin, and his religious paintings. In connection with this first exhibition, a second presentation (in the same part of the museum) aims to shed light on the nature and creation of sacred images in Rome and Paris, two cities where Poussin lived and worked in a century that was profoundly marked by religious conflict and spiritual revival. In coproduction with the RMN-GP (Réunion des Musées Nationaux-Grand Palais) and the Kunsthistorisches Museum of Vienna, the Louvre is also presenting the first monographic exhibition in France devoted to Velázquez, an outstanding artist described by Manet as “the painters’ painter.”

### Poussin and God
Musée du Louvre / Hall Napoléon
April 2–June 29, 2015
Exhibition Curators : Nicolas Milovanovic, Department of Paintings, musée du Louvre, and Mickaël Szanto, Paris Sorbonne University

### Making Sacred Images: Rome–Paris (1580–1660)
Musée du Louvre / Hall Napoléon
April 2–June 29, 2015
Exhibition Curators : Louis Frank, Department of Prints and Drawings, and Philippe Malgouyres, Department of Decorative Arts, musée du Louvre

### Velázquez
Grand Palais / Galeries Nationales
March 25–July 13, 2015
Exhibition Curator : Guillaume Kientz, Department of Paintings, musée du Louvre

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Poussin and God

Nicolas Poussin (1594–1665) is the greatest French painter of the seventeenth century, considered by some as the greatest of all time. However, the artist, who was described during his lifetime as the “French Raphael,” is less well known today than Watteau, Delacroix, Monet, or Cézanne. Poussin, a classical genius whose work was extraordinary in terms of style and significance, is reputed to be a scholarly, inaccessible painter, a “painter-philosopher” who can only be appreciated by the cognoscenti.

This exhibition, marking the 350th anniversary of the artist’s death, aims to introduce visitors to a little-known but particularly moving aspect of the art of this great French master: his religious painting. Although Poussin is famed for his depictions of nymphs, of Pyrrhus or Eurydice, many of his greatest masterpieces were inspired by the Bible.

However, few of Poussin’s sacred paintings have been studied in detail. Over the last century, interest in his work has tended to focus on his secular paintings, with experts continuing to debate the question of his religion.

Our exhibition features 99 of Poussin’s most beautiful sacred compositions (63 paintings, 34 drawings, and 2 prints) with which it hopes to open new perspectives and provide an overview of the possible Christian readings of his work. It also highlights one of the distinctive features of Poussin’s art: the blend of classical and Christian sacred traditions.

Although Poussin’s work is known to be permeated with neo-Stoic references, the Christian dimension of his painting has often been overlooked or even contested. A new take on his art from a religious perspective seems particularly interesting today, as recent studies have provided convincing evidence that his immediate circle was far less libertine than originally supposed, and have above all pointed up the originality of his sacred painting, reflecting a personal meditation on God.

The exhibition also highlights Poussin’s singularity in baroque Rome, in the period that followed the Council of Trent. When in Rome, Poussin painted alone, without collaborators or pupils, for clients who were mostly French. His distinctive style was matched by an originality of form and meaning. He is the only seventeenth-century artist to have so successfully and poetically combined the sacred and secular traditions, including ancient symbols and allegories in his biblical paintings and adding a Christian resonance to his secular compositions. In this respect, his art represents a highly original and inspirational new synthesis.
The exhibition opens with Poussin’s *Self-Portrait* (musée du Louvre) from Chantelou’s collection, and continues with a seven-part thematic and chronological presentation that considers Poussin’s religious paintings from three main angles: 1) his place within the post-Reformation Catholic tradition; 2) the originality of his blend of sacred and secular traditions; 3) the importance of the figure of Christ, often hidden behind Old Testament subjects and figures.

**Poussin and Roman Catholicism**

The first part of the exhibition presents large religious compositions reflecting the monumental and spectacular nature of Poussin’s sacred paintings: *The Death of the Virgin*, painted for Notre-Dame de Paris (the first presentation in France of a work that was lost for two centuries then rediscovered in the church of Sterrebeek in Belgium in 1999), *The Miracle of St. Francis Xavier* (musée du Louvre) and *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* (Vatican Pinacoteca).

Poussin’s contribution to the vast Catholic reform of the arts that accompanied and followed the Council of Trent remains relatively unexplored. Art at that time was intended to reclaim souls from Protestantism, which accused religious painting and sculpture of encouraging idolatry. Artists produced powerful new images that could touch the faithful and inspire them with a sense of the divine presence, particularly through the themes of rapture and mystical ecstasy.

Poussin’s contribution to this vast movement is apparent in the first part of the exhibition with the sublime *Assumption of the Virgin* (National Gallery of Art of Washington) and some very rare copperplates depicting Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane (private collections, presented together for the first time). However, the French master kept his distance from the official artists of papal Rome, following an increasingly personal path in terms of both subject and style. His art evolved toward greater abstraction and distance, and most of the time, the divine presence was merely suggested.

**The Holy Family**

The Holy Family, an iconic seventeenth-century image, was a leitmotif in Poussin’s art. His paintings on this theme, now in the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, are less well known than his history paintings and are among his least studied works.

Poussin’s Holy Family scenes are original for their non-narrative style and static, almost timeless quality. With their abstract, “musical” beauty, they have been compared to Bach’s cantatas and Beethoven’s symphonies.

These works were variations on a group composition: the artist modelled small wax figures which he placed in a large box, changing their positions or his own viewpoint and analyzing the resulting changes in light effects. This technique helped him master harmonies of mass, colour and contrast in a repetitive, musical manner recalling Vermeer’s genre scenes.
Poussin’s Christian Friends

Poussin’s connections with “libertine” circles have tended to be spotlighted, while his Christian friendships are generally overlooked. Poussin’s entire oeuvre and the main stages in his artistic development were influenced by a small group of Christians to whom the artist was particularly close. First among these was Cassiano Dal Pozzo, a renowned Roman collector and devoted patron of Poussin, whom the painter greatly admired. Others were French: Paul Fréart de Chantelou (cousin of the Superintendent of the King’s Buildings), for whom Poussin painted *The Gathering of the Manna* (Musée du Louvre), the merchants Jean Pointel and Jacques Serizier, and the painter Jacques Stella, who befriended the artist during his early days in Rome. Between them they appear to have owned almost a third of the master’s paintings.

These deeply pious art enthusiasts, almost all of whom remained single, contributed to Poussin’s renown in France and Italy. They also ensured his fame as the painter of Christianity—primarily Cassiano Dal Pozzo, for whom Poussin painted his famous *Seven Sacraments* series. Chantelou compiled a collection—whose structure and display the exhibition attempts to recreate—which determined Poussin’s reception in France; its aim was to establish him as the reformer of French art, “the French Raphael” and poet of the sacred mysteries.

Fortune and Providence

What clearly emerges from all Poussin’s work is a new synthesis of the classical and Christian sacred traditions. A key to this synthesis appears to be the connection made by the artist between fortune, in the classical tradition, and providence in the Christian sense. Poussin devoted many paintings to the vagaries of life on earth with its setbacks and tribulations, and to the dramatic moments when human fates are decided: young King Pyrrhus saved from death during a battle, the lovely Eurydice fatally bitten by a snake as Orpheus sings of their love and plays his lyre... Poussin invited the viewer to reflect on the vicissitudes of human life, governed by the secret order of divine providence rather than Stoic fate or Epicurean chance. In other works, he depicted God’s government of the world: Moses abandoned on the Nile, David triumphing over Goliath, Sapphira struck dead for telling a lie. Poussin’s painting *Eliezer and Rebecca* includes a stone sphere supported by a heavy pillar—a symbol of divine providence, reminding us that Rebecca was “chosen” by God.

Poussin and Moses

The frequent appearance of Moses in Poussin’s paintings—such as *The Exposition of Moses* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford) and *Moses Trampling on Pharaoh’s Crown* (private collection)—has often been commented on.

The figure of Moses had a particular significance in the 17th century for two main reasons: firstly, regarding the exegesis, he prefigured Christ, and most of the events in his life were seen as types of the life of Christ; secondly, the Hebrew legislator was believed to hold divine knowledge. According to the *Acts of the Apostles*, “Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in his words and deeds” (Acts 7:22).
He was thought to have initiated the transmission of monotheism in Greece through a series of wise men: Hermes Trismegistus, Orpheus, Aglaophemus, Pythagoras, Philolaus, and finally Plato. According to the great authority of St. Augustine, Moses was associated with Hermes Trismegistus, believed in the Renaissance to be the source of the prisca theologia doctrine combining paganism and Christianity. Poussin was particularly sensitive to these two aspects of the figure of Moses.

**Poussin and Christ**

During the 1650s, Poussin developed an Augustinian-style mysticism, and the figure of Christ became more important in his work. He followed St. Augustine’s view that the Gospel of John was superior to the other three, the former highlighting the divinity of Christ, the latter his humanity. *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery* and *The Blind Men of Jericho* both feature a young woman holding a child, recalling the traditional allegory of Charity. The two paintings can therefore be interpreted according to Augustine’s reading of John, which stresses the gentleness and clemency of Christ: “Gracious and upright is the Lord” (Psalm 24:9). *The Blind Men of Jericho* contains another clue to a spiritual reading of the episode, also according to St. Augustine, which indicates that their blindness is of the heart rather than the eyes: the cornerstone (symbol of Christ) on which the blind man has placed his stick.

**Sacred Landscapes**

The meditative or even mystical dimension of Poussin’s work is apparent in the large landscapes that he painted toward the end of his life. He took an interest in landscape painting throughout his career, but from the late 1640s until his death in 1665 he produced huge compositions in which Nature provides a sublime setting for human activity, reflecting the order of the world, from *Landscape with Orpheus and Eurydice* to *The Deluge* (both in the Louvre). The exhibition is also an opportunity to see the large *Landscape with Three Monks* (Belgrade, White Palace), last shown in France in 1934. Of all his landscapes, however, the masterpiece is the *Stormy Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* (Frankfurt, Städel Museum).

The *Four Seasons* cycle, completed a year before Poussin’s death, occupies a special place in his work and has often been presented as the painter’s artistic and spiritual testament. His treatment of the theme was completely new: each season is associated with an Old Testament story, and a Christian reading is needed to understand the choice of subject. Each scene features one of the main prefigurations (types) of Christ according to the exegesis of the Church Fathers. The hidden figure of Christ is therefore the secret link between the four compositions in the cycle, which is particularly noteworthy as evidence of the absolute mastery of a painter at the peak of his art: in each painting, the formal perfection of the classical landscape is transfigured by the deeply Christian meditation of an artist who sensed that his death was at hand.

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**Practical information**

**Opening hours**
Every day from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m., except Tuesday. Night opening until 9:30 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays.

**Admission**
Exhibitions *Poussin and God* and *Making Sacred Images*: €13
Combined ticket (permanent collections + exhibitions *Poussin and God* and *Making Sacred Images*): €16
Free for visitors under the age of 18, unemployed individuals, holders of the Youth, Professional, and Ami du Louvre cards.

**Audio Guide**
A selection of artworks commented on by the curators of the exhibition

Further information: [www.louvre.fr/en](http://www.louvre.fr/en)