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Painting for the Eye: Carle Vanloo's Drunken Silenus and the 18th Century French Academy

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Painting for the Eye: Carle Vanloo’s *Drunken Silenus* and the 18th Century French Academy
PAINTING FOR THE EYE: CARLE VANLOO’S DRUNKEN SILENUS AND THE 18th CENTURY FRENCH ACADEMY

By

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I. Introduction

I was first made aware of the French academic painter Carle Vanloo, during an internship at the Montana Museum of Art and Culture at the University of Montana. Knowing of my interest in Greco Roman mythology, curator Brandon Reinjtes showed me an interesting print from the collection, *Le Triumphe de Silene* by French engraver Louis-Simon Lempereur. A reproductive engraving after a painting by Vanloo, it displays a robust half-naked man, surrounded by supporting comrades in various levels of inebriation (Figure 1). I was immediately taken by this scene upon my first viewing, and my interest and curiosity only grew after initial research.

The painting was created as part of a competition, or concourse, conceived by the director of the French Academy, Charles Lenormand de Tourneham in 1747. This competition was intended in part to reinvigorate the genre of history painting and return it to the prestigious level of the previous century when ennobling paintings of classical and religious scenes were not just common, but superior. In an act which seemingly mocked the very goals of the concourse, Vanloo submitted the painting the *Drunken Silenus (L'ivresse de Silene)* which inspired Lempereur’s engraving some twenty years later. Oddly, Vanloo’s audacious submission did not appear to compromise his burgeoning career; rather, it solidified his credentials as an exemplary academic history painter. This thesis attempts to explore the significance of Vanloo’s puzzling submission of the ignoble drunken Silenus to the conservative 1747 concourse. Additionally, I will explore the painting in relation to the changing role of the Academy in French society, and within the stylistic trend of Rococo painting.

First, the history of the French Academy, which was still relatively young in 1747, the year of the concourse, will be presented as it provides the setting for Van Loo’s painting of
Silenus. Founded in 1648, many of the initial strict rules and regulations had relaxed by the middle of the 18th century. By the time of the 1747 concourse, artists and professors enjoyed more options than their predecessors which led to a change in artistic production. While some academicians were open to changing ideals, others wished to maintain tradition and the original intentions of its founding. This dichotomy of thought in part allowed for differing styles of art to emerge in the first half of the 18th century.

The French Academy was strongly indebted to its Italian counterparts when forming and structuring its pedagogic system, and therefore it viewed Italian arts and artists extremely highly. Vanloo won the coveted Prix de Rome in 1724 and traveled to the city a few years later, an experience which greatly influenced his future work. It was in Rome that Vanloo must have first seen images of Silenus, a mere demigod in the Greco-Roman Pantheon. Although Silenus was a character in numerous ancient texts, he remained an enigmatic figure in the visual arts of Vanloo’s time. Therefore, the iconographic and cultural context, as well as formal and stylistic characteristics, must be acknowledged when studying Vanloo’s *Drunken Silenus*.

Lastly, I will examine contemporary reactions to both the concourse and the painting and explore how it fits within general art criticism and theory at the time. I will take these steps in order to explain this perplexing question: why did Carle Vanloo, in a somewhat tenuous point in his career, choose such an ignoble subject matter and why was it an acceptable scene to paint?
Figure 1 Carle Vanloo, *Drunken Silenus*, 1747 Nancy, Musée des Beaux Arts
II. The French Academy

Many factors contributed to the formation of the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture. The original founders of the Academy were granted permission to organize the school in 1648 by King Louis XIV after mounting frustration with the powerful art guilds. The Guildsmen of the Corporation of St. Luke, also known as the maîtres, had enjoyed a monopoly over art production in France up to that point, charging exorbitant taxes and fees of all artists with the exception of a small number in the protected circle of court painters, or brevetaires. Not only did the guild tax artists on all non-court related commissions, but it also succeeded in limiting the number of court painters who were appointed in order to secure their stronghold on all commissions in Paris. Suffocated and threatened by these guilds, a group of brevetaires led by court painter Charles Le Brun turned to former French ambassador to Rome, and amateur painter Martin de Charmois to argue on their behalf.1 Recently returned to Paris, de Charmois was familiar with the Accademia di S Luca in Rome and he admired the organization. In a petition to the king, de Charmois (no doubt written with much guidance from Le Brun) stressed the superiority of the noble arts compared to the inferior “arts mechanique” and included many arguments borrowed heavily from Italian theorists and artists.

We have only one Alexander, but Paris has several men such as Apelles and many such as Phidias and Praxiteles, who can ensure that the radiance of his august face is felt in the most distant climes, and that the handsome traits and graces bestowed on it by the heavens are revered in those places. Your Majesty will not allow these ignorant men to paint that face; he will have the practice of such elevated arts forbidden to slaves, as indeed it once was; he will preserve the nobility of these arts, and leave in captivity those who have voluntarily submitted thereto by creating a trade corporation and thus placing themselves on the same footing as the basest of artisans. 2

2 Martin de Charmois, “Petition to the King and to the Lords of his Council,” in Art in Theory 1648-1815, 81.
In these last few lines, de Charmois reminded the king of the importance of art in preserving the royal legacy by insinuating that only a fool would allow an untrained painter to duplicate the visage of the monarchy. Therefore, one reason the king must build an official Academy, is to groom the preservers of the country’s history as well as his own legacy. Additionally, de Charmois argued that it was imperative to elevate painting and sculpting to a liberal art, one worthy of separation from the lowly guilds who saw visual arts as purely mechanical. A mere ten days later, the king granted the founders permission, and issued an official charter.\(^3\)

The charter for France’s first visual arts Academy was one which stressed dignity and virtue. So much so, that blasphemy or any negative comments towards the church were strictly forbidden in the very first criterion. Gambling, drinking or debauchery were also disallowed and the ninth statue reads “There will be close and friendly relations among members of the Academy, there being nothing so antithetical to virtue as envy, malicious gossip and discord.”\(^4\)

Clearly, the founders of the Academy wished to stress the moral and virtuous nature of their members and their craft, which separated them from the crude hedonism of the medieval guilds. This emphasis on moral superiority remains pivotal throughout the beginning years of the Academy, and acts as another way to separate and elevate the academicians above the guild-associated maîtres, who were known for raucous celebrations and feasts. The newly appointed academicians specifically forbade any such behavior that would tangentially link them to the lowly craftsmen.

The founders of the French Royal Academy looked to Italy, and in particular the Florentine Academy, for guidance on the structure and laws of an art Academy. Most of the

\(^3\) Pevsner
\(^4\) Art in theory, 88.
artists responsible for the formation of the Academy and its original curriculum were classical painters or sculptors, and were heavily influenced by the Italian school. Le Brun, one of the key instigators of the Academy had recently returned from a trip to Rome, and the evidence of a Renaissance or Classical influence in his paintings is quite clear. In particular, the works of Nicolas Poussin, the famed French painter working in Rome, as well as those of Italian classical painters such as Raphael, Annibale Carracci, and Domenichino served as sources for Le Brun’s work. Le Brun had contact with Poussin during his stay in Rome, and as Ann Sutherland Harris suggests, it was he who must have recommended Le Brun to Annibale Carracci and Domenichino, two prolific artists in Rome who would ultimately influence Le Brun. At this point in his career, the impact of Poussin and contemporary Italian artists is most evident; it can be seen clearly in Le Brun’s 1646 piece the *Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (Figure 2). This painting is stylistically and thematically parallel to a number of classical paintings found in Rome, namely, Poussin’s *Martyrdom of St. Erasmus* of 1628-29 (Figure 3), Domenichino’s *St. Cecilia Distributing Alms* of 1612-14 (Figure 4), and even Raphael’s, *Fire in the Borgo*, of 1514-17 (Figure 5).

Although the works by Le Brun and Poussin display a more characteristically Baroque style, all four paintings include similar architectural backgrounds and linear compositions. Of the four paintings, Raphael’s is executed in the most rigidly classic composition as was typical of the style of his day. The horrific scene is orchestrated in a calculated and linear composition, which lessens the drama and chaos that is so immediate in Le Brun and Poussin’s paintings. It is clear that the outstretched arms of Raphael’s figures directly influenced Domenichino, and even the poor souls escaping the fiery inferno of the Borgo fresco are mimicked in the peasant boys of

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Domenichino’s piece who scramble up the balcony to reach out for Cecilia’s treasures. In turn, both paintings by Raphael and Domenichino clearly influenced Poussin and then Le Brun.

Though the two Frenchmen altered their compositions slightly to accommodate the Baroque style in which they were painting, they would move away from the pandemonium and tension of the Baroque and into a more calculated composition in their later works. Le Brun completed his painting in Paris after his return from Rome for a commissioned altarpiece in Notre-Dame de Paris, and not under the direct tutelage of his Roman colleagues. Nevertheless, one can clearly see the careful figural rendering and classical settings in all four pieces and in particular, the influence of classical prototypes lauded by academicians. Specifically, the saints in Le Brun and Poussins’ work are reminiscent of the *Laocoön* (Figure 6) a famous Hellenistic sculpture which was part of the papal collection. *The Belvedere Torso* (Figure 7), also part of the Vatican’s collection, can be seen in a figure in Domenichino’s piece. The man seated in a twisted position in the lower left hand corner of the composition is clearly a painted version of the *Belvedere Torso*. Both of these pieces are highly important works from antiquity any classically-trained painter would have to study. While access to the actual sculptures and paintings in the papal collection was limited to a select few, engravings and copies of the famed pieces were circulated widely among student artists throughout Europe. Thus, painters using the classical pieces as inspiration in their art did not necessarily need to visit the Vatican in person in order to familiarize themselves with the work.

Le Brun was pivotal in creating the curriculum for the newly founded French Academy, and his admiration of the Italian school, so evident in his work, was echoed in this curriculum.

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In addition to simple techniques, it was understood that a proper artist must also have a firm understanding of geometry, perspective, music, astronomy, logic, biology, fables and history, human anatomy and physiognomy, as de Charmois explained in his original petition to the king.\(^7\) Once the Academy was officially formed, the curriculum was solidified and reflected the ideas set forth by de Charmois to King Louis XIV. As Nicolas Pevsner describes in his anthology of fine art academies, the rules and curriculum displayed a close dependence on the Roman and Florentine Academies. Lectures were the main source of information for the students, and drawing from live models was of utmost importance.\(^8\) Additionally, there were firm regulations regarding suitable artists for young students to copy. These were presented in a strict hierarchy, and, as Anthony Blunt explains, were as follows: “first the Ancients; secondly, Raphael and his Roman followers; thirdly, Poussin. The student was specifically warned against the Venetians, since they led to a too great interest in color, and against the Flemish and Dutch artists, since they imitated nature too slavishly, without discrimination.”\(^9\) Therefore, just as the Renaissance academies of Central Italy had prescribed, the French academicians valued the Ancient Romans above all else and dismissed the art of the Venetians.\(^10\)

The Florentine school of painting had historically countered with the school of the Venetians by valuing design over color. This scholarly discourse, known as the *disegno* versus *colore* debate can be traced back to the early Renaissance and the advent of the first European art Academy which was founded in Florence. Pevsner proposes that the very first Academy might have been one organized and taught by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). This theory is

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\(^7\) De Charmois, 85.
\(^10\) As Blunt mentions in his book, the majority of artists at this time regarded the term “ancients” to refer primarily to the Ancient Romans, and not the Greek.
based in part on a series of engravings from the era by Leonardo or one of his pupils with inscriptions such as “Academia Leonardi Vinci,” however, Pevsner admits that the “Academy” may have well just been an informal gathering of amateurs. In any case, Leonardo strove, if not in his teaching then in his writing, to move the art of painting from a manual craft based on pure mimicry of nature, to a science based on draftsmanship. One may not immediately consider Leonardo an overtly linear painter with his soft *sfumato* landscapes, however, he wrote extensively on the necessity of mastering *disegno*, or compositional drawing in his treatises on painting. He also stressed the importance of understanding perspective, a purely mathematical concept again linking painting to science. Leonardo praised *disegno* as the backbone of artistic practice because its tie to science reflected contemporary ideas in the writings and teachings of other major art theorists around him.

Leonardo was certainly not the first to stress the importance of *disegno* as the foundation for respectable art. Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) published his seminal work *On Painting* in 1436, a half century before Leonardo’s publications. In many ways, Alberti personified the academic ideals of the Renaissance and his writings were very influential. Originally written in Latin in 1436, he published an Italian version soon after, in order to elevate the stature of Italian history through its connection to the lost language of Latin. In this concise treatise, Alberti wrote the praises of painting as a noble pursuit, one which required a certain level of intellect to master.

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11 Pevsner 24.
13 Alberti 63. “The art was held in such high esteem and honor that it was forbidden by law among the Greeks for slaves to learn to paint; and quite right so, for the art of painting is indeed worthy of free minds and noble intellects.”
Both Alberti and Leonardo made a clear argument that painting should be elevated above common craftsmanship and above pure *mimeis* of nature. Nevertheless, it was Georgio Vasari (1511-1574) who most effectively argued on behalf of the intellectual artist as well as the need for an academic structure for emerging artists. According to Pevsner, Vasari suggested the idea of the *Accademia del Disegno* to the influential Cosimo de’ Medici around the mid-16th century. In accordance with the political and social requirements of the time, Vasari reached out to the Grand Duke of Tuscany to elect the founding members of the Academy, albeit with his own prudent guidance. Vasari understood that this connection to regional leadership would help solidify the Academy’s respectability and it would ultimately gain more power. Under the leadership of Cosimo and renowned artist Michelangelo, the two men selected thirty-six artists. Of this group, thirty-two of the artists lived and worked in Florence. This regional disparity solidifies what was already understood; the Florentine school with its emphasis on *disegno* was valued above all others in Italy.

Vasari made no apologies for his preference of linear over *colore* painting, and he emphasized his opinion in nearly every piece he wrote. In his 1568 book *On Technique*, Vasari wasted no time in informing the reader on the importance of *disegno*. The opening paragraph of his chapter on painting reads:

> Seeing that Design, the parent of our three arts, Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting, having its origin in the intellect, draws out from many single things a general judgment, it is like a form or idea of all the objects in nature, most marvelous in what it compasses, for not only in the bodies of men and of animals but also in plants, in buildings, in sculpture and in paint, design is cognizant of the proportion of the whole to the parts and the parts to each other and to the whole….we may conclude that design is not other

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14 Pevsner 42.
15 Ibid 45.
than a visible expression and declaration of our inner conception and of that which others have imagined and given form to in their idea.\textsuperscript{16}

With these words, Vasari simultaneously reinforced the Renaissance idea of art and intellect and argued that drawing, or \textit{disegno} is the foundation, and building block of every type of visual art. He too valued the ability to draw from nature, particularly live figure drawing. Just as Alberti had written nearly a century before, Vasari believed in the necessity of studying human anatomy. Vasari praised contemporary artists who followed his theory, as is evident on his chapter dedicated to Raphael in his anthology \textit{Lives of the Artists}. Vasari unabashedly praised the artist as a “mortal god,” and explained that “other masters paint pictures, but Raphael paints life itself.”\textsuperscript{17} In his description of the famed fresco \textit{School of Athens} (Figure 8) painted in the papal chambers, Vasari exclaimed “…the composition is so perfect in every part that the master proved his supremacy over all painters.”\textsuperscript{18} Raphael has often been considered the paragon of linear painting and \textit{The School of Athens} is a fine example of his mastery of \textit{disegno}. The composition incredibly symmetrical, and displays a perfect execution of one point linear perspective. It also displays the fully frontal compositional layout which was so common in High Renaissance paintings. This too can be seen in the \textit{Fire in the Borgo} (Figure 5), a fresco painted around the same time, also in the papal chambers. The outline and contour of each figure is so well defined it seems to demonstrate Alberti’s comment: “I want only the external outlines to be set down in circumscription; and this should be practiced assiduously.”\textsuperscript{19}

In contrast, Vasari wrote of the Venetian school, namely Titian, in a very different manner. Although praising the artist as a gifted painter and expressive colorists, he also listed

the faults of the Venetian school in general by focusing on the painter Giorgione, Titian’s teacher.

He failed to perceive that it is impossible to arrange a composition intelligibly without first sketching the forms and grouping them in different ways....Facility in designing and painting comes from a store of knowledge, a host of ideas garnered in many drawings, so that the artist can draw upon his own imagination for natural objects to put in his pictures. He who can draw need not rely on color alone to hide the lack of design as many of the Venetians do.\(^\text{20}\)

This is a markedly different approach than he took in describing the life and work of Raphael. In criticizing Titian and Giorgione’s methods of painting directly onto the canvas without any preparatory sketches, Vasari essentially criticized the entire regional school of painting for working naively. This assertion was founded upon a disposition towards art of Central Italy; a bias not held by Vasari alone. While it is true that fewer drawings survive from Northern Italy as opposed to Central Italy, it was a gross misstep to assume that none existed at all. In his book studying Italian Renaissance drawings, Francis Ames-Lewis partially attributed this regional prejudice to why so few Northern Italian drawings remain today. Additionally, he argued, not only did collectors eagerly acquire Central Italian drawings because of their prestige, not as many northern works were collected simply because fewer drawings were produced. If the northern painters were more interested in color, he reasoned, then sketches and drawings logically were not the appropriate avenue in which to experiment.\(^\text{21}\)

While Vasari condemned the Venetian painters for relying on color to attract the eye of the viewer as opposed to the intellect, others applauded them for appealing to our emotions. Adding to the already established theory coming from Florence, some Venetian authors argued that color, seen by the Florentines as a necessary though ancillary aspect of painting, was in

\(^{20}\) Vasari 247.

fact essential in portraying beauty and nature. Ludovico Dolce (1508-1568), a Venetian author working in mid-16th century, was one such proponent and he expanded greatly upon Vasari’s paltry report on Titian. Dolce’s most famous work, *Dialogo della Pittura*, was published in Venice in 1557, and presented a fictitious conversation between two contemporary art critics, Pietro Aretino (1492-1556) and Giovani Francesco Fabrini (1516-1580).²² The two men discuss at great length the nobility of painting and the various characteristics of a perfect painting. Furthermore, they discussed the top painters of their day, including the famed Venetian Titian. Using the two men as mouthpieces for his own artistic theory, Dolce expressed his opinion about the positive attributes of color, especially in the ability to render flesh in an extremely lifelike manner. While Vasari and Alberti celebrated the use of a strong contour line around figures, Dolce argued the opposite when he instructed “the blending of the colors needs to be diffused and unified in such a way that it is naturalistic, and that nothing offends the gaze such as contour lines, which should be avoided (since nature does not produce them).”²³ Therefore, the highest achievement of a painter, according to Dolce, was the ability to accurately render nature on canvas. This was achieved through a masterful use of color, rather than the Florentine belief in line.

The ability to portray the human figure as well as the manner in which it is displayed, can be seen as a microcosm of the entire debate between schools. The Florentines believed strongly in studying human anatomy, and as Alberti instructed in his writings, to begin with the skeleton, and then clothe the figure in muscle, sinew, and flesh.²⁴ This interest in the human

²³ Ibid., 155.
²⁴ Alberti, 72.
form with special attention given to the muscular anatomy of the figures can be seen clearly in
countless Renaissance pieces. Even when portraying women, a gender more often associated
with soft curves, we often see extreme detail in the musculature of the figure. This is
particularly clear in Raphael’s triumphal seas scene *Galatea* of 1513 (Figure 9). The titular
classic character, highlighted all the more through her centrality and stark contrast between her cape
and nude flesh is caught in an act of great athleticism. Every muscle in her body seems to be
flexed and strained and ready for action.

In contrast, the Venetian ideal of painting and representation of the human form can be
seen in Titian’s *Pastoral Concert* of 1509 (Figure 10). Titian has rendered his two nudes in a
soft, painterly fashion, without a hint of angularity. Dolce clearly preferred this type of
representation, and argued in favor of it in his *Dialogo*, through the voice of Arentino:

> I think myself that a delicate body ought to take precedence over a muscular one. And
the reason is that, in art, the flesh areas impose a more strenuous task of imitation than
the bones do. For nothing goes into the latter except hardness, whereas only the flesh
areas embody softness, the most refractory element in painting – so refractory, indeed
that the number of painters who have had it at their command in the past or give it
satisfactory expression in their work today is very small indeed.\(^{25}\)

Titian’s flesh betrays softness repeated in the hills and trees in the scenery creating a
composition almost completely devoid of harsh edges or outlines. In this case, the soft edges
and painterly approach befits the calming scene he created.

The debate between the Venetian *colore* and Florentine *designo* was not one with a
clear victor, nor did it end with the Renaissance. It was reborn with fervor, around the founding
of the French Academy by French theorists and academicians. Because the majority of the
founding members of the French Academy admired the Florentine and Roman style of painting.

\(^{25}\) Dolce, 143.
they also taught and promoted the practices. This complete admiration of the Italians and the Central Italian style was highlighted by the coveted Prix de Rome prize, an award which was officially instated in 1666. One superior student would be sent to Rome each year for a term of around three years to study and to copy approved ancient, classical, and Renaissance art, and a curriculum rooted in disegno.

Primarily because it was modeled after Florence and Rome, the French Academy regarded line as the most important formal element. This position, however, did not last forever. French theoreticians began to build upon the Italian archetypes to create new theories and positions, and successive generations championed their respective sides using contemporary art to argue the point. Although the original representatives of the colore/disegno debate could be said to have been Titian and Raphael, the debate had been updated by the founding of the French Academy in the early and mid-18th century. Those who preferred outstanding color looked to Flemish Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens as the paragon of painterly colorists. Supporters of strong design rallied behind Nicolas Poussin. Therefore, the debate became known as the battle between the Poussinistes, versus the Rubenistes.

There were several reasons behind Rubens’ rise to popularity in France at the turn of the 17th century. Armand-Jean du Plessis, the Duke of Richelieu, an important art collector at the time particularly helped bolster the popularity of Rubens in the public and Academy. A wealthy man drawn to gambling, the Duke of Richelieu inherited the majority of his impressive collection from his uncle, the influential Cardinal Richelieu.26 Originally, the Duke of Richelieu’s

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taste in pictures leaned towards the classical Italian paintings popularized from within the Academy, which explains in part why he owned so many Poussin paintings. As popular myth tells us, however, he lost his collection in 1675 to King Louis XIV after losing a bet during a tennis match. For 50,000 livres, the Duke sold an impressive array of Poussins which are still housed in the Louvre collection. As entertaining as it may be, however, it probably is far from the truth. Jonathon Brown proposes that the story was most likely embellished in order to downplay the author’s own gambling habit.\textsuperscript{27} Regardless, the Duke did sell his collection of Poussin paintings, and refurnished his depleted collection with an assortment of pictures in a completely different style. From the artist’s nephew, he bought a series of paintings by Rubens. As Brown suggests, due to the French entry and victory over the Netherlands, Flanders was in a state of financial turmoil, therefore Rubens’ nephew Phillip was willing to part with his uncle’s personal collection.\textsuperscript{28} Among these paintings were the \textit{Battle of the Amazons} (Figure 11), \textit{The Fall of the Damned} (Figure 12), and the \textit{Drunken Silenus} (Figure 13). It could be argued, that the Duke bought these pictures with the intent of profiting from the rise in the artist’s popularity. Paintings by Rubens and other Flemish artists were readily available on the art market in part due to the crumbling financial situation in Flanders. This demand for Rubenesque paintings would ultimately influence production of fine art in the French Academy. Rubens would become a highly regarded painter in the eyes of the public and art critics alike, in part because of the persuasiveness of color supporters within the Academy.

This academic discourse became especially heated within the walls of the French Academy. The lines between theory and the institution became so blurred that, as Jacqueline

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 219.
Lichtenstein suggests, to attack the privileged position of drawing was to attack the Academy itself.\textsuperscript{29} Attacks on drawing began slowly and were mostly from amateur art appreciators, however, they gradually gained support from the academicians. As early as 1668 the amateur artists Roger de Piles translated and commented upon the Latin poem \textit{De Arte Graphica} by fellow color enthusiast Charles Alphonse Dufresnoy. This pivotal work, according to Lichenstein, became a manifesto championing the colorist cause.\textsuperscript{30} As part of his notations accompanying the poem, de Piles broke down painting into three sections: invention, design, and coloring. All three are essential to painting, however, he added that design, “which consisting of only lines, stands altogether in need of the coloring to appear” while color was the “soul and ultimate achievement of painting.”\textsuperscript{31}

De Piles argued that color was an integral aspect of painting, one which should not be overlooked or underappreciated. According to scholar Svetlana Alpers, De Piles appreciated artists who were “more interested in the way images seduce the eye than in the way they address the mind.”\textsuperscript{32} Therefore, he was an ardent supporter of Rubens, and even wrote the catalogue for the Duke de Richelieu when he purchased the new paintings by Rubens.\textsuperscript{33} His theory was cultivated predominately in intimate circles of amateurs. It was first supported by an academic in 1671 when Gabriel Blanchard included some of De Piles’ theories in his lecture \textit{On the Merits of Color}. Responding to a previous lecture by fellow academician Phillip de Champaigne, Blanchard countered some of the negative comments de Champaigne made

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\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 147.  \\
\textsuperscript{31} Roger de Piles, \textit{Remarks on De Arte Graphica}, 1668, in \textit{Art in Theory 1648-1815}, 167.  \\
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 73.
\end{flushright}
against Titian, and the painterly Venetian school.\textsuperscript{34} In his oration supporting color, he became the first French academician to address Rubens in an official capacity.\textsuperscript{35} Rubens would come to embody the modernist movement towards painterly color in the coming years. Change, albeit slowly, was occurring within the strict academic structure of the French Royal Academy.
Figure 2 Charles Le Brun, *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew*, 1646, Getty Museum, Los Angeles

Figure 3 Nicolas Poussin *The Martyrdom of St. Erasmus*, 1628-29, Vatican Museum
**Figure 4** Domenico Zampieri Domenichino, *St. Cecilia Distributing Alms*, 1612-14, S. Luigi dei Francesi, Rome

**Figure 5** Raphael, *Fire in the Borgo*, 1514-17 Vatican Museum
Figure 6 Laoöcon, 1st century BCE Vatican

Figure 7 Apollonius, son of Nestor, the Athenian, Belvedere Torso, 1st century BCE, Vatican Museum
Figure 8 Raphael, *The School of Athens*, 1510-11 Vatican Museum
Figure 9 Raphael, *Galatea*, 1513, Rome, Sala di Galatea, Villa Farnesia

Figure 10 Titian, *Pastoral Concert*, 1509, Louvre, Paris
Figure 11 Peter Paul Rubens, *Battle of the Amazons*, 1617-18, Alte Pinakothek, Munich

Figure 12 Rubens, *Fall of the Damned*, 1617-18, Bayerisches Staatsgemäldesammlungen, Munich
Figure 13 Rubens, *Drunken Silenus*, c. 1615, Alte Pinakothek, Munich
By the time Carle Vanloo had entered the Academy in 1735, the rigidity of acceptable art in Le Brun’s Academy was waning. Just like his fellow countryman Rubens, Vanloo turned toward brilliant colors in his later work. Born in Nice in 1705 to an artistic family of Flemish descent, Charles-André Vanloo, called “Carle,” began his art career at a young age. Although born in France to a Flemish family, he was more Italian than French in terms of his artistic upbringing. Before ever reaching Paris or the French Academy, Vanloo studied drawing and sculpture in Rome with his older brother Jean-Baptiste as well as with an Italian tutor, Benedetto Luti in 1716. Vanloo was so taken with sculpture, that his biographer Michael Dandré-Bardon (1700-1783) claimed that his love for sculpture was so strong that he constantly lamented his choice to study painting. Regardless of his hesitations, Vanloo continued his studies of painting and drawing, and traveled to Paris in 1720 to continue his education. Bardon described his style at this time as being soft with light and easy strokes, and as being inspired by the beauty of nature. As Colin Bailey noted, his earlier works, still reflect the...
influence of his brother and Luti, especially in the elongated figures and luminous settings. At this point in his career, Vanloo still displayed careful figural rendering and sharp contour lines.

The same year, Vanloo won the Prix de Rome with his piece *Jacob Purifying His Home Before His Departure* (location unknown). Although he wasn’t able to travel immediately due to lack of funds in the Academy, he did make the trip a few years later. Accompanying him were his nephews and colleague and later rival, Françoise Boucher (1703-1770). According to Bardon, while he was in Rome, Vanloo spent his time copying “les grands maîtres” Raphael, Domenichino, and Carracci.

The majority of the work by Vanloo at this time reflected his growing interest in imitating the Italian masters, however, we do begin to see a burgeoning interest in color. One of the more obvious examples of his interest in the Italians, made during his second stay in Rome was his painting *Aeneas Carrying Anchises*, a large scale history painting depicting the Homeric myth taken from the Iliad (Figure 14). Though Vanloo clearly studied Raphael, Domenichino and Carracci in Rome, Bailey rightly connects this piece to the late Renaissance altar painter, and colorist Federico Barocci. His piece in the Villa Borghese, *Aeneas’ Flight from Troy* of 1598 (Figure 15), would have most likely been available to Vanloo to study due to his connections to Cardinals and other high ranking Catholic officials. Such officials would be able to make the necessary introductions and recommendations to the powerful Borghese family. Many of Vanloo’s paintings contain visual aspects which can be easily attributed to

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42 Bardon, 15.
43 Bailey, 429.
44 Bardon, 16. As Bardon recalled, the influential Cardinal de Polignac, the French Cardinal in the Vatican supported Vanloo, and Vanloo interacted often with the catholic elite. Therefore, it is quite possible that because of these
pieces in the collection. Both paintings of Aeneas’ Flight from Troy from Vanloo and Barocci, share the same subject matter and color scheme, though Vanloo’s composition is much more intimate and dramatic than Barocci’s. The characters physically encompass more of the picture plane than in Barocci’s piece which adds to the tension of the scene. This is a very different compositional layout than in Vanloo’s later career; it displays the intensity and drama of a Baroque design rather than the linearity of the French Classicism. It is clear, by looking at this painting as well as one other major commission he received at the time, the Apotheosis of Saint Isidore (in situ) (Figure 16) that Vanloo had aspirations of becoming a history painter. Although his subject matter is steeped in classicism, and he is still looking towards the Italians for inspiration, this painting affirms Vanloo’s emerging interest in color. This is clear seen in his interest in an Italian colorist, and he softens the image greatly from Barocci’s version.

Upon his return to Paris, Van Loo was officially admitted into the Academy in 1735 with his piece Apollo Flaying Marsyas (Figure 17). Vastly different in style from his Roman work, Aeneas Carrying Anchises (Figure 14), it is a traditional historical painting, and one perfectly demonstrating the goals set forth by the Academy. One can clearly see the influence of Annibale Carracci in this piece; the subject matter, color, and layout of this image all resemble any one of Carracci’s paintings from the Farnese ceiling Loves of the Gods (Figures 18 and 19). Both artists chose an extremely frontal composition laced with defined contours and similar themes. The subject matter in both images reminds the viewer to respect and obey the gods. Where the contour lines are slightly blurred in his Aeneas Carrying Anchises (Figure 14), they are crisp and clear in Apollo Flaying Marsyas (Figure 17). Vanloo resorted back to the clear-cut
goals of the Academy when he chose the theme and style of this painting for his admission
piece. Although Le Brun and the original founders of the French Royal Academy were deceased
by the time Vanloo was admitted, their influence of taste and style still resonated in the ruling
academicians.

Vanloo’s popularity and success grew rapidly after his admission. One year after his acceptance
he was made an assistant professor and was promoted to professor in 1736. Although never fully
moving away from history painting, Vanloo made his living largely through portraiture. According to
Bailey, Van Loo was also well known for his turqueries, exotic genre pictures of the Far East. Vanloo’s
ability to alter his style and technique for each individual patron may seem to represent an artist’s inner
conflict, that is between preferring line or color. This is not the case, as Bardon has noted; it was in fact,
part of Vanloo’s ingenious ability to imitate the old masters and to approach each commission
accordingly. Thus, Vanloo was midway through a full length portrait of Queen Marie Leczinska, the
Polish princess made Queen of France when the announcement for the 1747 concourse was made
(Figure 20).
Figure 14 Carle Vanloo, *Aeneas Carrying Anchises*, 1729,
Paris, Musée du Louvre

Figure 15 Federico Barocci, *Aeneas’ Flight from Troy*, 1598, Rome, Galleria Borghese
Figure 16 Vanloo *The Apotheosis of Saint Isidore (in situ)*, 1729. Hambourg, Kunsthalle
Figure 17 Carle Vanloo, *Apollo Flaying Marsyas*, 1735, Paris, École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts

Figure 18 Annibale Carracci, *Homage to Diana*, 1595-1600, detail from *Loves of the Gods* Ceiling Fresco, Rome, Galleria Farnese, Pallazzo Farnese

Figure 19 Annibale Carracci, *Loves of the Gods* Ceiling Fresco, Rome, Galleria Farnese, Pallazzo Farnese
Figure 20 Carle Vanloo, Portrait of Queen Marie Leczinska, 1747, Versailles, National des Châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon
IV. The 1747 Concourse

The concourse of 1747 was born amid turmoil. Barely 100 years old, the Academy was split between two schools of thought that fought bitterly. Etienne La Font de Saint-Yenne, a contemporary art critic, wrote a brief pamphlet lamenting the sad state of history painting. In it, he wrote “The history painter alone is the painter of the soul, the others only paint for the eye.” Accusing popular contemporary painters as producing mindless eye candy, he was one of the first critics to write openly about the deplorable state of academic painting by the mid-18th century. La Font was an amateur critic, not associated formally with the Academy, and the academicians were thoroughly insulted by the words of an uneducated outsider. Although La Font was scrutinized mercilessly over such a “few light-hearted reflections” by the leading academicians, it seems the offending opinions he expressed in the publication were not his alone. Like La Font, Academy Director Charles Lenormand de Tourneham felt the Academy needed to reinvigorate the genre of history painting to the prestigious level of its founding, when edifying subject matter and disegno reigned. In 1747, the recently appointed director planned on achieving this by organizing a concourse, or competition within the Academy, one modeled after a similar one held previously, in 1727. Inviting eleven academic history painters to submit a scene of their own choosing, Tourneham publically exhibited the entries to highlight the glory of the Academy’s finest current painters of the genre; those who were to rival the masters of the past including Le Brun and Poussin (Figures 2 and 3). What Tourneham found, however, was the submitted themes were not the same edifying subject matter of 17th century

50 Ibid. 560. These few light-hearted reflections will not, I think, lead to my impeachment by today’s practitioners of this genre, nor weary the public of their talents.
French Classicism. Instead, the paintings resembled the *fete galantes* frivolities which were so popular in Rococo painting. When Tourneham and other leaders of the Academy attempted to enforce a traditional, classical style through the concourse, they were met with criticism from the public as well as unsatisfactory artworks.

The artistic climate of 1747 was not as well managed and uniform in style as it had been at the time of the Academy’s founding. When he was appointed the position of Director in 1745, Tourneham was presented with a crumbling academic infrastructure. Morale and state prestige had diminished so greatly that the position of *painter du roi*, or first painter to the king had been vacant for nearly ten years and royal commissions had decreased significantly since the death of King Louis XIV. The engraver and first officer of the Academy Charles-Nicolas Cochin reflected on the sad state of painting shortly after the king’s death as being unprotected and unsupported.\textsuperscript{51} The majority of patrons at this time were now looking to decorate smaller Parisian hotels, rather than grand palaces and country homes of the previous century. Therefore the market for great historical scenes was nearly nonexistent. Furthermore, as Thomas Crow suggests in his book *Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth Century Paris*, “had [the academic painter] turned his talents to large-scale narrative painting, there would have been no more buyers lining up.”\textsuperscript{52} Crow underscores the compensation disparity by comparing a typical private patron with a royal commission. Royal patronage was distributed infrequently and typically paid a fraction of the price than a private patron. Furthermore, it could take years before the sum was fully paid. In the competition of 1747, the top academicians passed on the challenge set forth by Tourneham, preferring to concentrate on pieces which would be more

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.
financially beneficial. While many of the artists who participated in the concourse were guaranteed compensation (nearly all the pieces in the exhibition were purchased by the crown), it was a pittance compared to what they were able to receive from private commissions.

Tourneham, therefore, had the immense task of elevating the reputation of both the institution and the works it produced. Of all the arts, it was history painting, a genre traditionally revered as the clearest demonstration of intellectual art, which suffered considerably in the popular shift from the logic and precision of French Classicism to the hedonistic intimacy of Rococo.

A public competition of this kind was not new to the art world. Writing enthusiastically about the 1747 competition, the contemporary art critic Abbé Jean-Bernard Le Blanc likened the event to an episode recounted by Vasari in his life of Sebastiano del Piombo. According to Vasari, Sebastiano and Raphael supposedly engaged in a light hearted competition. The two paintings were put on display to be judged by the public. By including this vignette, Le Blanc seemed to have been attempting to equate contemporary French competitions with the glory of the High Renaissance in Rome while also stressing the importance of public access to the fine arts.

Like the Romans of the High Renaissance, the Parisian public was accustomed to such events. In mounting his concourse, Tourneham borrowed the idea, rules and conditions for the 1747 competition from one similarly organized in 1727 by then Directeur-général des bâtiments, the Duc d’Antin. D’Antin stipulated that the paintings be the same size and display historical content freely chosen by the artists. The results were hung in the Galerie d’Apollon in

the Louvre, the very same gallery Tourneham picked for his competition twenty years later. Both men organized their competitions with hopes of reinvigorating the Academy in the eyes of the public, therefore boosting the reputation of both the Academy, and its leadership.

Public response to the two competitions varied as well. The original inspired lively debate among connoisseurs and the general public alike. General consensus deemed the prize winning picture to be Noël-Nicolas Coypel’s *Rape of Europa* (Figure 21), an illustration of a myth taken from the ancient Roman poet Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The *Mercure de France*, a Parisian gazette shared Le Blanc’s enthusiasm for a, “noble rivalry” among colleagues in order to create the “most beautiful pictures.”

By 1727, the Rococo style was still in its infancy, and the competition of the same year had not yet gone wholly over to the new modern style. In 1699, the ideological quarrel between Poussinisme and Rubénisme had been somewhat pacified, with the latter, or the colorists camp emerging victorious. Color, in academic doctrine, was finally equal in fundamental importance to draftsmanship or design. This dogmatic shift occurred when the colorists’ leading figure, Roger de Piles became an honorary member of the Academy. As noted earlier, De Piles had championed for the freedom of brush which was evident in Rubens’ work. In part because of the support of de Piles, Rubens was included in the Academy’s pantheon of great masters. Because of the leniency of the Academy at that point, as Pevsner noted, “sentiment was allowed to guide the judging of pictures where before the application of fixed precepts had reigned.” Such fixed precepts which had historically demanded draftsmanship over color, however, did not change overnight. Although the colorists were awarded

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54 Berger, 161.
55 Ibid.
56 Pevsner, 103.
acceptance in the eyes of the Academy, it would be years before Rubénisme would actually be an acknowledged and practiced form. Therefore, in 1727, when Coypel submitted his *Rape of Europa*, it still displayed strong evidence of design over color. Coypel’s composition is reminiscent of Raphael’s water scene painted in 1513, his *Galatea* (Figure 9). Even more similar was a painting done for the Cardinal Richelieu, (the Duke de Richelieu’s uncle) by Poussin. His *Birth of Venus*, of 1638-40 (Figure 22) though ostensibly portraying a different myth, displays the same extravagance and celebration of linear form as Raphael’s and Coypel’s works. It seems that Coypel quoted Poussin directly when designing the flowing cloth above the head of his Europa. Coypel softened both line and color in his work, it still maintained the linear integrity of French Classicism. This piece, therefore, acts as an important example of the Academy’s gradual shift from Classicism to Rococo.

In the twenty years following the 1727 exhibition, public opinion shifted drastically. The narrative which received so much public praise in 1727 had tired in twenty years, and became the subject of castigation. When Rococo artists, such as Boucher were ordered to create such grand historical paintings, the results appeared forced and misguided. One anonymous critic published a pamphlet about the 1747 concourse chastising the content now displayed by Boucher, as bland and irrelevant:

The “Rape of Europa [by Boucher (Figure 23)], isn’t that a bit worn out? “Pyrrhus at the Court of Glaucius” [by Collin de Vermont] is a subject which is little known and even less interesting. And what a lovely gift to offer a king in need of a tableau d’histoire, this “Diogenes Drinking from his Hand after Breaking his Cup” [by Etienne Jeurat]. As far as their execution is concerned, it was of such a quality that they were all relegated to the storerooms. I say then that when the Academy has performed so poorly in terms of both content and form, there can be no doubt that it has collapsed.57

57 Quoted in Crowe, 12. Information in brackets is Crowe’s, figure information is mine.
The anonymous author therefore sharply publicized the popular dissatisfaction with the exhibition. The paintings on display were either too trite or too esoteric, with no happy medium to assuage the viewers. This passage also reinforces the enduring power of the Rococo style, especially in the eyes of the public. Instead of forcing his style to meet the required historic or mythological themes, Boucher seemed better suited to produce sedate pictures of nude goddesses as seen in his Toilet of Venus (Figure 24) which was privately commissioned by Madame Pompadour, mistress to Louis XV.

What is striking about such negative criticism is the absence of any mention of Carle Vanloo, or his piece The Drunken Silenus (Figure 1). Why, in a setting supposedly intended to represent edifying historical pictures, should this scene be present? With the exception of a brief mention by Le Blanc, who insinuated that he could have produced a nobler scene, the question of subject matter was never approached.\(^{58}\) Other enthusiastic authors, such as Antoine Bret, found the piece deserving of first prize, and declared Vanloo to be “the Rubens of our age” adding that his color equals the master in both candor and emotive force.\(^{59}\) That Vanloo was a Rubenist is clear. Vanloo has historically been praised for his playful use of color, just as was the Flemish master of the previous century, yet he shared subject matter with Rubens as well. Therefore, the lack of controversy surrounding this piece may point to the popularity of Rubens at this time.

\(^{58}\) Loves of the Gods, 431.
\(^{59}\) From Nice catalogue, author’s translation.
Figure 21 Noël-Nicolas Coypel, *The Rape of Europa*, 1727, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Figure 22 Poussin, *Birth of Venus*, 1638-40, Philadelphia, Philadelphia Museum of Art
Figure 23 François Boucher, *The Rape of Europa*, 1747, Paris, Musée du Louvre

Figure 24 François Boucher, *Toilet of Venus*, 1751 New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art
V. **Pictorial Sources for Vanloo**

The scene is highly abnormal within the overall oeuvre of Vanloo. While mythological subject matter was commonplace in his work, a glance through his catalogue raisonné shows that he only created a handful of Bacchanal scenes at best, and only one other painting which included a character who is recognizably Bacchus. This is evident in his *Bacchus and Ariadne* of 1733 (Figure 25) where Vanloo has presented the lovers gazing intently into each other’s eyes, small putti crowning Ariadne with a ring of stars. The *Drunken Silenus* was his only painting to include Silenus. While the demigod was not a popular subject matter, it was by no means unheard of. Annibale Carracci, for example, made many engravings and paintings of Silenus in Rome (Figure 26).

The most convincing source, however, for Vanloo’s *Drunken Silenus* is a piece by the workshop of Rubens entitled *Drunken Silenus Supported by Satyrs* (Figure 27). Originally painted circa 1620, in the eighteenth century it was falsely attributed to Rubens. The London National Gallery now attributes the painting to Anthony Van Dyke. The painting’s provenance is muddy, with certain scholars believing it once belonged in the collection of the Duke of Richelieu. If this was so, Vanloo would have had direct access to the painting, as is claimed by Colin Bailey. Pictorial evidence certainly points to this, however, Svetlana Alpers and the National Gallery in London claim, it did not belong in the Duke’s possession. Alpers and Brown believe that the Duke owned a different Rubens painting of the same subject matter, one which is now housed in the Pinakothek in Munich. It is believed the the Duke of Richelieu purchased this particular work from Phillip Rubens (Figure 13). Regardless, it is clear that Vanloo, at some time, had access to a Silenus image by Rubens.
With a slightly more controlled brush, Vanloo followed Rubens’ example of velvety colors and softened contour lines. Silenus sits prominently in the center of Vanloo’s composition, dominating the majority of the picture plane. There is no mistake about who the main character is here! Surrounding him are his fellow revelers as well as fruitful bounty which seems to explode around the celebrants. This abundance, paired with ivy headdresses, panther skin, and the traditional *thyrsus*, all match traditional Bacchic iconography, which would have helped the viewer identify Silenus. The warm, rosy-hued colors he used on the central figures contrast with the darker shades of the background. Although the entire painting has the soft edges and swirling colors characteristic of a Rococo scene, it seems as though Vanloo reserved the most detail for the objects in the extreme foreground, leaving the group’s setting was more ambiguous. In fact, one could potentially view the piece many times before noticing the trumpeting satyr hidden in the shadows. Vanloo omitted hard lines and fine detail in his figures preferring to soften the edges and use color as a tool to separate the figures. This can best be seen in the clouds. Rather than paint bright white cotton balls in the sky, he softened the outline so that the edges of the clouds almost blend into the blue of the sky. Light shines directly on Silenus, bathing him in a warm glow which also attracts the eye. Two of the figures are fairly hidden by the shadows, and although the rest are bathed in light they lack the heavenly glow reserved for Silenus. Of the three figures standing in the light, two are looking out at the viewer. The small putti, supporting Silenus’ foot, and the satyr holding a collection of fruit both invite the viewer to engage with the characters and participate in the celebration.

Although they share subject matter, Vanloo’s *Drunken Silenus* is vastly different visually than Rubens’ version. Vanloo depicted a warm and inviting scene, something that the viewer might actually want to join. Conversely, Rubens depicted Silenus in a pitiful state. So overcome
with drink, the man can hardly stand, and surely would stumble to the ground without the
assistance of his companions. Silenus, in Rubens’ painting, is at such an angle and contrasts so
greatly with his group that it creates a feeling of unease and disequilibrium. This sentiment is
matched in his color palette. The warmth of Silenus’ flesh is countered by the darkness of his
surroundings which have also been darkened greatly. Lastly, although his followers seem to be
enjoying the celebration, Silenus himself appears to be scowling at his predicament. Vanloo’s
version of Silenus by comparison is jovial and content.

Rubens was in no way Vanloo’s only source of inspiration. One can hardly glance at the
painting without immediately recognizing a character borrowed from Caravaggio to the right of
Silenus. Caravaggio, a painter famous in the early 17th century for his often times grotesquely
lifelike scenes, may seem an unlikely comparison to Vanloo. At the turn of the century,
however, Caravaggio produced a series of numerous Bacchus characters, a number of which
were on display at the Gallery Borghese in Rome at the same time that Vanloo was studying
there. These paintings, especially the *Sick Bacchus* of 1593 (Figure 29) display the exact same
headwear and attire of a Bacchic follower, and although Caravaggio’s self-portrait has a sickly
pallor, the similarity is undeniable. Although ostensibly not a Bacchic character, Caravaggio’s
*Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, also from 1593 (Figure 29), shows the same abundance of nature
typically seen in a Bacchic procession or celebration. Vanloo’s painting mimics this idea of the
wealth and verdancy in nature in his painting.

Contemporary descriptions of Vanloo’s *Drunken Silenus* made no connection between
Vanloo and Caravaggio. Although Vanloo clearly used Caravaggio as a model in creating at least
one of the characters in *Drunken Silenus*, the comparison to Rubens overshadows any other
influences. This is most likely why there is little to no mention of Caravaggio in any
contemporary writings. Caravaggio remained relatively unknown and unappreciated at the time; contemporary readers most likely would have been unable to understand the comparison.
**Figure 25** Vanloo, *Bacchus and Ariadne*, 1733 (private collection)

**Figure 26** Annibale Carracci, *Drunken Silenus (“The Tazza Farnese”), c. 1597-1600, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art*
Figure 27 School of Rubens (attributed to Anthony Van Dyke), *Drunken Silenus Supported by Satyrs*, c. 1620
London, National Gallery
Figure 28 Caravaggio, *Sick Bacchus*, 1593, Rome, Borghese Gallery
Figure 29 Caravaggio, *Boy with a Basket of Fruit*, 1593, Rome, Borghese Gallery
VI. Historical Sources

Both Rubens and Vanloo borrowed from antiquity, and although the scenes could be either Ovidian or Virgilian in nature, they are not narrative in subject matter. Enough ancient literary references and representations of Silenus were made for the artists to make recognizable representations of the demi-god. Both men were well learned in antique subjects which is clear when we look to ancient texts and artworks. Appropriate Bacchic iconography can be found in both paintings which borrowed directly from the ancients. The mythos and iconography of Silenus are closely entwined with those of the god Bacchus. Silenus originated in Greece in association with the ancient Greek god Dionysus. According to the generally accepted birth myth of Dionysus, he was the offspring of Zeus, the king of the gods, and Semele, a mortal woman. When Semele witnessed the awesome power of Zeus’ true form, she was simultaneously killed and impregnated. The infant Dionysus was then taken and sewn into his father Zeus’ thigh for the remaining incubation. Once the child came to term, Zeus sent him to live with the forest nymphs in the mountain of Nysa in order to hide him from the jealous wrath of his wife Hera. In the forest, the nymphs and Silenus, a demigod who acted as his tutor and foster father, raised Dionysus.

In his essay “The Beardless Dionysus,” Thomas H. Carpenter commented that Dionysian scenes were among the most popular seen on sixth and fifth century Attic vases, with the majority of them being unrecognizable myths. Rather than representing a mythological narrative, Dionysius was simply shown in a procession, walking among satyrs and maenads. This idea of a non-narrative representation was replicated by artists for hundreds of years after

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60 Dionysus is the Greek god equivalent to the Roman deity named Bacchus. The two names are often interchanged, however, when referring to Greek myth, the name Dionysus will be used, as Bacchus will be used when referring to Roman myth.
this period, as we have seen in both Rubens and Vanloo’s representation of Silenus. During these centuries known by art historians as the Archaic Period in Greek art, Silenus was frequently represented as a “type” rather than a specific individual. Although he is named specifically in various myths, it will be a while before we see the recognizable Silenus character, which was referred to by Ovid and reproduced by Vanloo and Rubens. Rather, Carpenter describes the satyr shown at this time as a \textit{Papposilenus}, a character borrowed from the theatre who acts as the leader of the chorus.\footnote{Ibid., 217.}

It is believed that before the Roman assimilation of the Dionysus/Silenus myths, the Etruscans, Rome’s northern neighbors accepted both gods into their pantheon. Larissa Bonfante reminds us that although the Etruscans left behind frustratingly little written works, there are plenty of carved pieces with inscriptions and identifiable iconography which inform us of a local god named Fufluns.\footnote{Larissa Bonfante, “Fufluns Pacha: The Etruscan Dionysus,” in \textit{Masks of Dionysus}, Thomas H. Carpenter ed. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 221-222. Specifically, Bonfante cites “some thirteen thousand inscriptions (dating to 600-100 B.C); some two thousand engraved bronze mirrors, many inscribed; and other representations in sculpture, vases, jewelry, and so forth.”} The Etruscans were already well aware of Dionysian iconography through the many Greek vases which were imported by wealthy families. Etruscan artists seamlessly translated scenes from Greek vases into their art without major alterations.\footnote{Ibid., 223.} Bonfante notes the importance of goddesses and loving couples specifically in early Fuflun iconography that contrasted with contemporary Greek Dionysian iconography. Many characters from Dionysian processional imagery, however, translated as well. Characters resembling the \textit{Papposilenus} characters were seen at this time, and are often referred to as “sileni” or as “a silenus.” Such variety in the language infers that the fully developed character of Silenus was not yet established in Etruria. Although the imagery is similar to contemporary
Attic vases, the Etruscan sileni are often portrayed as more sexual and wilder than their Greek brethren. They seem to engage in activity which traditionally had been reserved for the younger satyrs. For example, this type of activity is clearly evident in the antefix statuary of the Temple of the Mater Matua, in ancient Satricum, a city South East of Rome (Figure 30). In this pair, the silenus is shown in the nude, as was common in Greece, though he grabs lewdly at the young maenad from behind.

After closely mimicking the ancient Greek sileni prototype, Roman artists made a dramatic shift away from the traditional representation to this new Silenus figure. The exact reason for the representational shift is debatable, but after reviewing contemporary literature, one can begin to see a solidification of his character which would naturally carry over into the visual arts. Poets and playwrights during the empire wrote specifically of the god, thereby molding the ancient deity into a new and more easily recognizable figure.

Many Roman poets and playwrights such as Ovid, Virgil, and Plutarch served as literary sources for artists’ visual representations. These authors not only inspired visual artists contemporary to their lifetime, but for artists hundreds of years later, such as Vanloo and Rubens. Ovid, Virgil, and Plutarch were able to evolve the development of the Silenus character description from the Greek tradition, which in part led to visual artists altering their representation of him as well.

Ovid gained notoriety through his adaptation of the aforementioned Greek myths into his own body of work, *Metamorphosis*, and was popular for this during his own lifetime. Ovid was lauded in literary circles and read highly among scholarly men of the Roman Empire,

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regardless of Emperor Augustus’ displeasure with the morally questionable subject matter. This speaks to both the talent of the author as well as the popularity of the subject matter.

Ovid’s poem is an expansive work which attempted to cover all of humanity beginning with the myth of creation and ending with the death of Julius Caesar, a contemporary event at the time of the writing. Although the precise literary sources for the Greek myths are largely unknown, Ovid seemed to have modeled his work on the epics of Homer and Hesiod, another ancient Greek poet.65 Although the specific Greek sources that Ovid used are unknown, we can still easily recognize the myths in the Metamorphosis as Greek. This is especially true in the myths of Bacchus and Silenus. Nearly every story involving either god told by Ovid can be traced to a piece of Greek art, affirming that Ovid was not the original author of the tales but only the translator. This includes the Greek tale of Silenus and King Midas. In the story, Silenus, “staggering from age and inebriation,”66 is bound by Phrygian townsmen and taken to their leader, King Midas. The king immediately recognizes the prisoner as a follower of Bacchus, and has him released. Upon his safe return, Bacchus grants the king one wish. With that wish Midas requests, “…that whatever my body touches will turn into gold!”67 Representations of this myth have been found on vases dated from the fifth century B.C.E. as is evident in an Attic red-figure stamnos dating to the third quarter of the 5th century B.C.E. (Figure 31). In this particular stamnos, the Silenus figure remains more satyr than man as was the common representation at that time.

The poet Virgil, contemporary of Ovid and best known for his historical epic the Aenied, also wrote of Silenus. Virgil, however, chose to take a rather different approach to the

65Ibid., xv.
66 Ovid, Metamorphoses, 6.127.
67 Ovid Metamorphoses 6.146-147.
character. In his *Eclogues* of circa 43-37 B.C.E., Virgil wrote 10 individual Eclogues which compiled create the Bucolic collection. Bucolics are pastoral poems, or shepherd’s songs. Edward Brooks suggests in his introductory essay to the *Bucolics and Georgics of Virgil* that they were written in part as a response to the Roman government commandeering his family’s farmland.  

Virgil provided his readers with some depth to the character Silenus. In his verse, Silenus explains to the readers the reason for his song: while asleep from too much wine, two local shepherds stumbled upon him. Finding him with his “veins-as usual-swollen thick with yesterday’s drinking: the garlands had slid from his head to the floor, and a weighty wine jar dangled from the fingers that had worn its handle thin” the two bound him with his own wreaths of ivy and threatened to keep him bound unless he performed a song. The majority of the Sixth Eclogue is the result. To the shepherds, Silenus sang of the creation of the world and of moralizing stories intended to instill respect for the gods. Virgil described the scene while Silenus sang: “You could have seen the fauns and every wild thing caper in time to his music then, and the stiff oaks bow their heads.” At the mercy of these two mischievous shepherds, Silenus is forced to sing while bound and humiliated. Silenus thus is given more depth to his character through the philosophical discourse, however, cannot escape the reputation of loving wine to excess.

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Probably the most interesting reading of Silenus can be found in the writing of Plutarch. A Greek by birth, Plutarch eventually became a Roman citizen and learned Latin.\textsuperscript{71} Known as a very scrupulous man, many of his writings were concerned with issues of morality. For the purpose of this study, his book entitled \textit{A Letter of Condolence to Apollonius} is the most enlightening. As its title suggests, the book is a letter to a man named Apollonius (whether such a man actually existed is debatable) after Plutarch heard of the death of his son. It is unique in that the majority of it consists of a collection of quotations from various contemporary and past authors rather than from the author’s voice. Of these quotations, one is from Silenus:\textsuperscript{72}

That not to be born is the best of all, and that to be dead is better than to live. And the proof that this is so has been given to many men by the deity…. But for men it is utterly impossible that they should obtain the best thing of all, or even have any share in its nature (for the best thing for all men and women is not to be born); however, the next best thing to this, and the first of those to which man can attain, but nevertheless only the second best, is, after being born, to die as quickly as possible.\textsuperscript{73}

Plutarch continued by analyzing Silenus’ words, and postulated that existence must be better after death than in life. Such pessimistic words from such a seemingly jovial character! Plutarch thus offers the most complex and interesting of the three author’s representations of Silenus, one which is rarely, if ever, echoed in the visual arts.

If Plutarch’s representation of Silenus as a cynical philosopher/prophet is not often seen in the visual arts, Ovid’s is clearly the prototype. Artists in the 17\textsuperscript{th} and 18\textsuperscript{th} century therefore utilized Ovid’s description of Silenus when reproducing him in their paintings or sculptures. To argue that images of Silenus were widespread would be an understatement. Some form or

\textsuperscript{72} Plutarch was actually referring to a now lost work by Aristotle entitled \textit{Eudemus}, or \textit{Of the Soul}.
\textsuperscript{73} Plutarch, \textit{Moralia}, 115.
another of the deity can be found in just about every type of art produced in the Roman world, however, it is important to differentiate between pieces devoted specifically to Silenus and those of generic Bacchic imagery. Bacchanal processions and triumphs often include Silenus as part of the retinue strictly because he belongs as a celebrant. As a lover of wine as well as the foster father/tutor to Bacchus, it is only reasonable that he would be present in the iconography. Bacchic processionals or triumphs were incredibly popular motifs on sarcophagi because in part they helped reaffirm life’s pleasures. This is evident in the sarcophagi reproduced here from the 2nd half of the 2nd century C.E. (Figures 32 and 33). Silenus is shown in the relief sculpture on this particular sarcophagus as Ovid described him.

    Lynxes in harness draw your car,
    Bacchantes and Satyrs follow;
    The boxwood flutes begin to wail,
    Their music fills the hollow.\textsuperscript{74}

Lines such as these provide the reader with a clear image of the cacophony and chaos of the procession, a subject easily translated into marble. This Ovidian and therefore Roman representation of the demigod, staggering from inebriation became the archetypical representation of Silenus. It was this representation which was copied and mimicked throughout time, and not the Archaic Greek representations which displayed him as more satyr-like.

It is well known that Rubens favored the ancient Roman poet Virgil, and carried with him a collection of the poet’s more expressive descriptions in a notebook. Therefore, it is assumed that he was familiar with Virgil’s \textit{Eclogues}, a collection of pastoral poems written in the last half of the first century BCE. Alpers strongly argues in favor of the Virgilian inspiration

\textsuperscript{74} Ovid \textit{Metamorphoses} 4.44-47.
for Rubens, although this piece does not illustrate a particular narrative. According to Alpers, Silenus “...is empowered or creative in the sense that, when drunken and bound he abandons himself to his song. This was a great part of his appeal to Rubens. This is Silenus according to the Roman poet Virgil.”75 To Virgil, and thereby to Rubens, Silenus represented a figure so involved in his art that he forgets his surroundings and his pathetic situation. In Virgil’s verse, the song that Silenus sings tells the tale of the creation of the earth as well as other moralizing myths and fables. Virgil, therefore presents his reader with a complex character, one who is simultaneously a prophet and a pessimistic drunk. It is clear that Rubens attempted to represent this side of Silenus to the viewers, not the joyous and laughable version set forth by Ovid. Indeed, this despondent attitude was not lost on 18th century viewers. De Piles, when writing the Duke of Richelieu’s catalogue of newly purchased Rubens paintings, described the drunkenness of Silenus as “mélancolique.”76

Vanloo, in a characteristically Rococo manner, seems to model his representation of Silenus not after Virgil, but in a more Ovidian fashion. Neither negativity nor pessimism is apparent on the visage of the demigod, who smiles paternally at his fellow revelers. Only celebration and merriment is present in Vanloo’s composition, a sentiment echoed in the words of Ovid’s Metamorphoses, Book 4: “Your revelers collapse in laughter, As swaying on his mule, Or staggering drunkenly after, Silenus plays the fool!”77 Where Rubens envisioned a more Virgilian, somber Silenus, one who has the ability to get lost in his work, Vanloo loosely modeled his version on the Rubens piece, while altering it slightly to fit the needs and wishes of his contemporary viewers. What results is a more Ovidian representation.

75 Alpers, 106.
76 Ibid., 112.
77 Ovid, Metamorphoses, 4.48-51
Figure 30 Silenus and maenad from the Temple of the Mater Matua, Satricu, c. 500-490 BCE (left)

Figure 31 Attic red-figure stamnos, third quarter of the 5th century BCE.
Figure 32 Marble sarcophagus with scene of Bacchanal, 2nd half of 2nd century CE

Figure 33 Marble sarcophagus detail of Figure 32
VII. Conclusion

The alteration away from Rubens’ representation certainly seemed to have been beneficial. Some twenty years following the concourse of 1747, in 1765, the engraver to the king, Louis Simon Lempereur, printed a copy of the painting (Figure 34) for the Marquis de Marigny (1727-1781), the current Directeur des Bâtiments. While the exact reason for the copy is unknown, we do know that the original painting hung in the apartment in Versailles where Maringy stayed. The engraving arguably loses the original appeal of the painting, by translating the colorful painting into a black and white engraving, however it was still considered popular enough to produce. This engraving exemplifies the importance of the original, and subsequently, the enduring popularity of the Rococo style by the 1760’s.

Vanloo’s Drunken Silenus of 1747 remains a perplexing piece among his overall oeuvre. A painter who, as his biographer Bardon admitted, was clearly able to alter his style at a whim, chose his subject matter very conservatively. One has to wonder if he regretted this decision after seeing the paintings he made after 1747. His catalogue raisonée displays countless religious scenes, grand mythological tableaus, and portraiture, but very few nudes or celebratory scenes of sybaritic revelers as he included in Drunken Silenus. Even this scene when compared to those of contemporaries such as Boucher or later Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806), it seems tame. Additionally, this piece was aberrant in its execution. As Colin Bailey noted, no preparatory sketches for the Drunken Silenus can be found, a perplexing idea when considering Bardon’s description of his working methods. According to Bardon, Vanloo was so
disciplined, that he wouldn’t produce anything on canvas until he had perfected it first in a drawing. Perhaps it is for this reason that his *Drunken Silenus* became so soft and whimsical.

Banished to relative obscurity through the passing of time, Vanloo was nevertheless a highly celebrated Rococo painter during his lifetime. He was elevated to the position of Painter to the King in 1762, an enviable position. Shortly after his death in 1769, his reputation began to plummet, so much so that his name became pejoratively tied to the frivolous nature of Rococo. Followers of Vanloo, would be known mockingly as “Vanlooters,” and despite considerable achievements during his lifetime, his legacy has barely survived today. It would be only nearly half of a century before the “painters of the soul” of whom La Font wrote in 1748 would put an end to the predominance of Rococo. Many attribute the 1784 submission of the *Oath of the Horatti* by Jacques-Louis David as the birth of the Neo-Classical movement, and subsequent death of Rococo (Figure 36). Rubénisme and the colorists celebrated a brief period of triumph in the mid-18th century before falling out of favor. In a grand victory for proponents of the “painters of the soul,” Neo-Classicism became the dominant academic style, and remained so well into the 19th century.

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78 Bardon, 50. Le stile de notre célèbre artiste étoit un ingénieux compose des gouts de plusieurs grands peintres. Ses procédés à l'égard du dessein étoient si austeres qu'il ne produisoit reien, ne changeoit, ne réformoit pas la moindre partie que le contour n'en fût decide par un trait correct.”

79 Bailey, 429.

80 Ibid.
Figure 34 Louis Simon Lempereur, *Triumph of Silenus*, Engraving after Vanloo, 1765 Missoula, Montana Museum of Art and Culture
Figure 35 Jacques-Louis David, *Oath of the Horatii*, 1784, Paris, Musée du Louvre
VIII. Bibliography


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