



An introductory talk on Nicolas Poussin's *Extreme Unction*: 15 minutes

- Although Nicolas Poussin was born in Normandy in France in 1594, he spent the vast majority of his working life in Rome where he died in 1665.
- In 17th century Rome, there were many archaeologists, artists and scholars exploring the classical past through ancient literature and excavations that were taking place throughout the city. Rome, and many of its inhabitants, were at the heart of the Counter Reformation Church, following the Protestant Reformation which had denounced papal authority in the 16th century.
- One of Poussin's early patrons was the Pope's nephew Cardinal Francesco Barberini, and it was the Cardinal's secretary – Cassiano dal Pozzo – who commissioned this work with six others in around 1636-8.
- Poussin made numerous studies of well-known antiquities and various ancient Roman artefacts represented in Cassiano's renowned Museo Cartaceo or 'Paper Museum', which provided documentary evidence of Roman customs, costume and architecture.
- *Extreme Unction* is one of seven sacraments. Of the Christian sacraments, Protestants generally recognize two, *Baptism* and *Communion*, and Catholics seven. The seven sacraments are ceremonies that point to what is sacred, significant and important for Christians. The other four are *Penance*, *Marriage*, *Ordination* and *Eucharist*.
- The subject shown here are the moments before death when the Catholic Church administers the rites of *Extreme Unction*, the sacrament of Anointing the Sick. Unction means "anointing with oil" and extreme refers to the fact that the sacrament was usually administered in extremity, in other words when the person to whom it was being given was in grave danger of dying. It is notable that Poussin's painting is not set in the contemporary 17th Roman Catholic Church, but painted as he imagined the event taking place in ancient Roman times.
- The artist worked without assistants. He began a painting by researching the subject and made notes before starting preparatory drawings. Once the artist had made a design he transferred it to a canvas from squared drawings, and then painted on the canvas. According to his biographer Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613-96), Poussin often worked from life models, and this is evident in the figures of his early works. Several of his 17th-century biographers recorded him using a 'grande machine' ('great machine'), a type of perspective box with little clay figures, about 10 cm tall, to experiment with the positioning and lighting of figures in space.
- Composition of picture – use of perspective line, for example, to give added emphasis to pattern of floor tiles, windows and doors.

- His use of classical prototypes include the coffered ceiling and a tripod table with each leg imitating that of a mythical beast, such as a lion or griffin. Poussin's careful study of Roman attire is reflected in the classicising style of the robes and gowns. Circular motifs, such as the one on the rear wall, are commonly found on Roman funerary stelae or stone slabs, symbolising eternity and the cycle of life and death.
- Use of colour to draw your attention to certain figures and lead your eye across composition
- Poussin creates a rhythm across the painting through interlinked gestures of hands, arms and feet, and varied expressions inspired in part by his knowledge of classical bas-reliefs. For this painting he drew inspiration from a group of sarcophagi in the Villa Albani, in Rome, representing the Death of Meleager; later engraved in 1645 by the French painter, François Perrier.
- Poussin's legacy – highly prized by the 18th-century travellers or tourists in Italy because of a shared interest in the Antique. Influenced the classical development of French art for 200 years.
- After Cassiano dal Pozzo died in 1657 Poussin's series of paintings representing the seven sacraments passed through family descent until 1785, when it was sold for £2,000 to Charles Manners, 4th Duke of Rutland, and brought to Britain
- *Extreme Unction* was acquired by The Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge in 2012 through the HM Government's Acceptance in Lieu Scheme, with support from The Heritage Lottery Fund, The Art Fund and numerous charities and public donations.
- This painting is the most important old master painting to enter the Fitzwilliam's collection for over a century, and makes a notable addition to the permanent collection of 17th-century paintings alongside other celebrated works by Poussin and those of his contemporaries.
- This tour provides an opportunity for the public to engage with this painting in galleries in Oxford, Liverpool and Edinburgh, all of which offer equally interesting contexts for this remarkable painting.