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Poussin deploys conventions of classical art—such as brightly colored draperies, majestic columns, and exaggerated gestures—to depict the disciples healing the lame man.

Nicholas Poussin (1594-1665), SAINTS PETER AND JOHN HEALING THE LAME MAN (1655). Oil on canvas. 49 1/2 x 65 in. Marquand Fund, 1924 (24.45.2). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY. Photo Credit : © The Metropolitan Museum of Art; image source: Art Resource, NY. Used by permission.

Unexpected Healing

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

To “a man lame from birth” who was carried to the Temple to beg alms, the Apostle Peter says “I have no silver or gold, but what I have I give you; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, stand up and walk” (Acts 3:6). As Loveday Alexander explains, “Peter’s lack of ‘silver and gold’ (v. 6; perhaps due to the community’s policy on property, 2:44) highlights both the unexpected character of the miracle (the beggar is looking for money, not healing, v. 5) and the apostles own dependence: only ‘in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth’ can healing take place.”¹

When Nicholas Poussin interpreted this story from Acts 3:1-10 late in his career, he was a well-established Baroque painter who preferred the revival of classicism in art rather than the realism of his contemporary, Caravaggio. For instance, Poussin depicts the story’s setting – “the Beautiful Gate” of the Temple – with classic architectural columns. The lame man reclines in a typically classical pose. He has a malnourished body, but it is not obvious that he cannot walk; indeed, no deformity or disability is evident in his figure. Poussin employs the conventions of classical art in other ways: the figures are heavily draped in robes of highly saturated colors (as in the Roman wall paintings that had recently been discovered), and are posed in rhetorical, animated gestures. The gestures are exaggerated whether the figures sit or stand, turn from or face us.²

Poussin prepared his compositions by organizing their primary narrative elements on small stages with wax figures and arranged draperies. For this one, he borrowed compositional ideas from Raphael’s version of the scene in the Sistine Chapel tapestries and the *School of Athens* (1509), a fresco painted in the Stanza della Segnatura for Pope Julius II. He also borrowed from Michelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* (1508-1512) the gesture between God and Adam, applying it to Peter’s touching the lame man. The Apostle John the Beloved, who is only a supporting character in the biblical story, has a similar role (rather literally) in the painting as he holds the elevated arm of the lame man.

NOTES

1 Loveday Alexander, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in John Barton and John Muddiman, eds., *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 1033.

2 Mary Sprinson de Jesús, “Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)” (October 2003), in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-) (accessed September 5, 2012) www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/pous/hd_pous.htm.