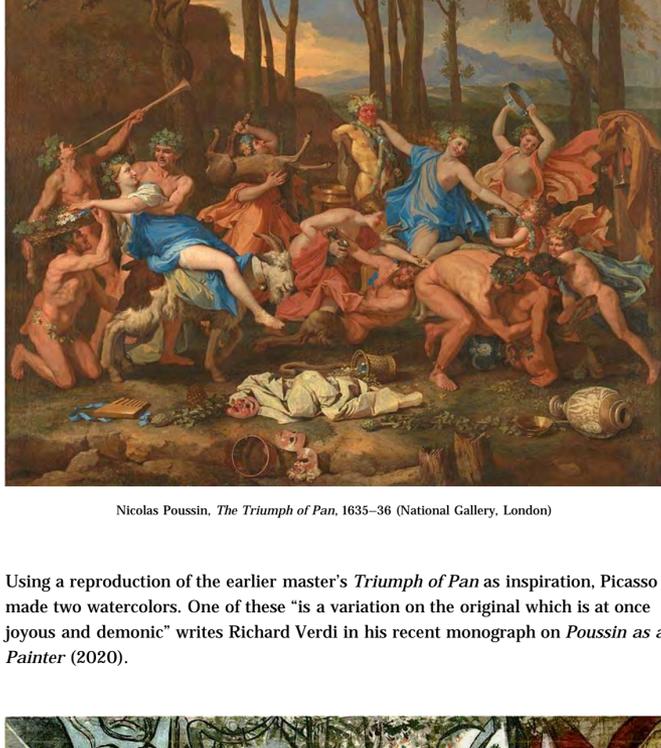


C. G. BOERNER

DEALERS IN FINE ART SINCE 1826

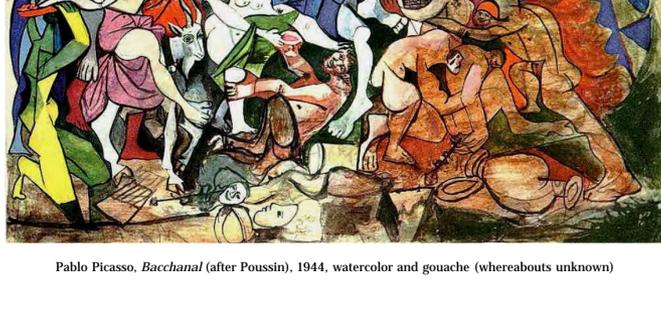
Distraction / Abwechslung
26 April 2022

In late August of 1944, during the liberation of Paris from Nazi occupation, Picasso immersed himself in the study of Poussin.



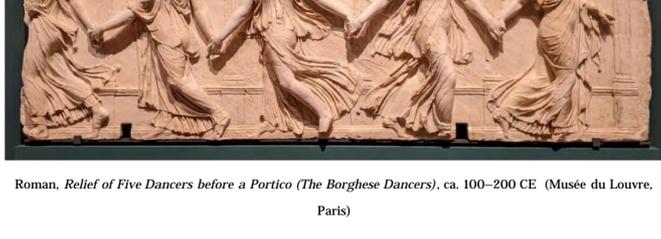
Nicolas Poussin, *The Triumph of Pan*, 1635–36 (National Gallery, London)

Using a reproduction of the earlier master's *Triumph of Pan* as inspiration, Picasso made two watercolors. One of these "is a variation on the original which is at once joyous and demonic" writes Richard Verdi in his recent monograph on *Poussin as a Painter* (2020).



Pablo Picasso, *Bacchanal (after Poussin)*, 1944, watercolor and gouache (whereabouts unknown)

"Altering and heightening Poussin's color so that it is both more clamorous and aggressive," Verdi writes, "he jettisoned the master's strictly choreographed design in favor of one that is more riotous." My mind kept returning to this anecdote back in March when I walked through the Getty Museum's extraordinary show *Poussin and the Dance*. Outside the museum, the sky above the smog level of Los Angeles was speckless, with the glistening sunlight reflecting off the travertine limestone of Richard Meier's architecture. Inside, once one's eyes had adjusted, one could encounter the most astonishing loans of masterworks by Poussin along with—since this was a "Getty exhibition"—some of the antique sculptures that had been Poussin's inspiration when he worked in his adopted hometown of Rome.



Roman, *Relief of Five Dancers before a Portico (The Borghese Dancers)*, ca. 100–200 CE (Musée du Louvre, Paris)

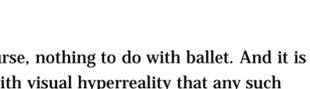
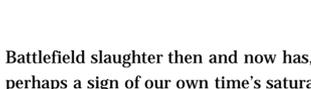


Nicolas Poussin, *The Realm of Flora (detail)*, 1630–31 (Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden)

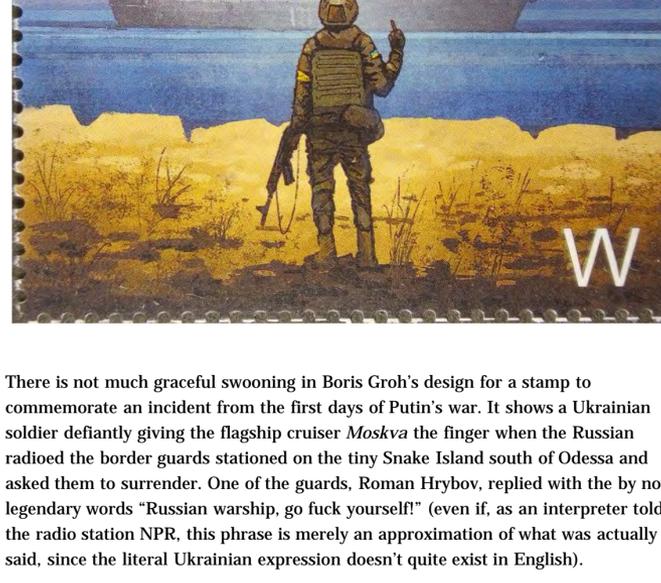
The feeling was unworldly, especially so since 6,000 miles further east Russia's brutal invasion of Ukraine had just gotten underway. The killing fields of the mid-twentieth century had become alive again in the most horrific way imaginable.

Alfred Barr called Picasso's focus on Poussin as "an exercise, a self-discipline." Verdi, writing as a historian with the privilege of knowing the outcome, suggests that in the midst of tragedy he might not only have seen "the controlled frenzy of one of the French master's finest inventions" but "also have found something more than this in Poussin's bacchanal, as it transported him to a better world, offering a promise of the liberation shortly to come." Unfortunately, the tragedy we are witnessing now is not over, nor do we know when and how it will end. Surrounded by images of dance, I was no longer sure if Picasso's strategy could still work.

Dances were not all Poussin painted. There were also scenes of rape and murder, yet, in his art, even those acts of violence were sublimated as if they were a ballet—hence the apt title "Choreographing Violence" chosen for the show's last room.



Battlefield slaughter then and now has, of course, nothing to do with ballet. And it is perhaps a sign of our own time's saturation with visual hyperreality that any such attempt of artistic sublimation could hardly ever be credible again. That an artist is nonetheless still able to offer some uplifting interpretation of events became apparent in one of the very few more lighthearted stories coming out of Ukraine these days—even if, choreographically speaking, the visual creation has as little to do with Poussin as pogo dancing has with the Sugar Plum *grand pas de deux* in the second act of *The Nutcracker*. To understand what I mean, just compare, for example, the pair of images shown above: one is a detail from Poussin's *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* in ca. 1633–34; the other is a snapshot from the concert the Dead Kennedys in 1981, taken by Michael Grecco the very moment Jello Biafra, the band's lead singer, hit the ground.

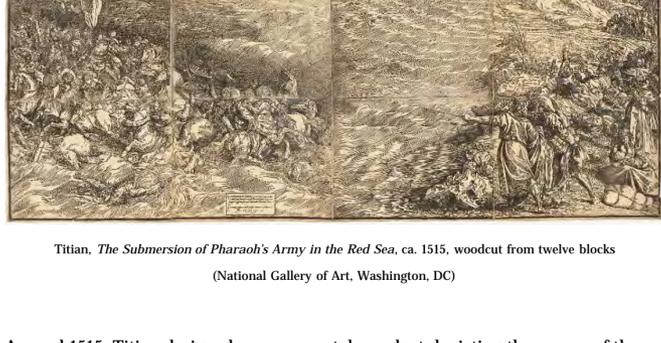


There is not much graceful swooning in Boris Groh's design for a stamp to commemorate an incident from the first days of Putin's war. It shows a Ukrainian radioedier defiantly giving the flagship cruiser *Moskva* the finger south of Odessa and asked them to surrender. One of the guards, Roman Hrybov, replied with the by now legendary words "Russian warship, go fuck yourself!" (even if, as an interpreter told the radio station NPR, this phrase is merely an approximation of what was actually said, since the literal Ukrainian expression doesn't quite exist in English).

Igor Smelyansky, the director of the Ukrainian Postal Service (Ukrposhta), pointed out that the *Moskva* was hit by Ukrainian anti-ship missiles a day after the stamp was published. It is now resting at the bottom of the Black Sea, whereas Hrybov and his comrades are alive after being freed in a prisoner exchange—and the stamp, which Ukrposhta issued in an edition of one million copies, has already sold out.

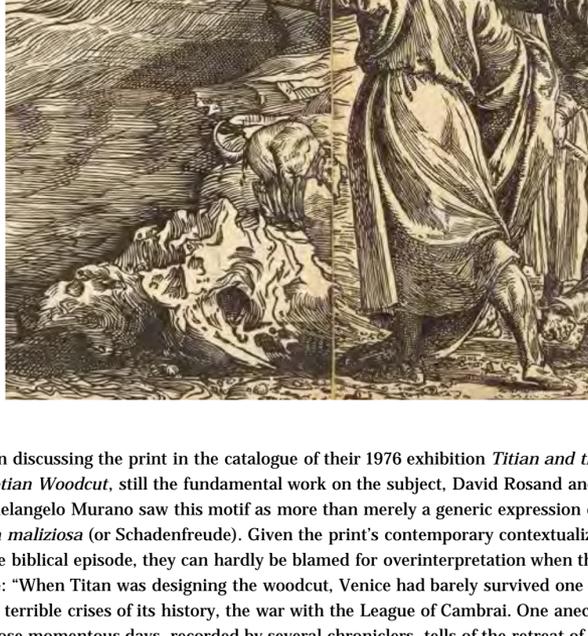
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Not all "old art," however, was sublimated elegance (could this perhaps be a "French thing?"). To prove my point, I would like to conclude with an inelegant gesture of defiance that dates back some 500 years.



Titian, *The Submersion of Pharaoh's Army in the Red Sea*, ca. 1515, woodcut from twelve blocks (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC)

Around 1515, Titian designed a monumental woodcut depicting the escape of the Israelites from Egypt. It shows the moment when they had safely reached the shore while the army of the Pharaoh is drowning in his own waters, with the Red Sea are closing in on them. Titian transposes the scene into his own time, with the silhouette of Venice appearing high up on the horizon. If one looks closer, one can make out the somewhat uncouth detail of a defecating dog below the outstretched arm of Moses at lower right.



When discussing the print in the catalogue of their 1976 exhibition *Titian and the Venetian Woodcut*, still the fundamental work on the subject, David Rosand and Michelangelo Murano saw this motif as more than merely a generic expression of *gioia maliziosa* (or Schadenfreude). Given the print's contemporary contextualization of the biblical episode, they can hardly be blamed for overinterpretation when they wrote: "When Titian was designing the woodcut, Venice had barely survived one of the most terrible crises of its history, the war with the League of Cambrai. One anecdote of those momentous days, recorded by several chroniclers, tells of the retreat of the imperial troops through the mountains of the Valsugana: to show their scorn for the foreign invaders, the inhabitants of that area were said to have bared their buttocks to the fleeing German soldiers. It is thus possible that the Egyptians in Titian's Red Sea, dressed in contemporary armor, were intended to recall the invading mercenaries from the north and that the subject was read in allusion to the recent survival of the Venetians themselves against overwhelming odds."

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Sometimes it is perhaps just necessary to do away with elegance. No ballet here, just a very concrete allegory for a resilient people during a time of serious strife—as is Boris Groh's stamp. Now we can only hope that those brave fighters at the Eastern edge of *Mittleuropa* will get enough support to be able to pogo on: *Sláva Ukraini! Heróyam sláva!*

