



Richard Wollheim

Learning from Poussin

From a conversation with Leon Kossoff at his London studio

When I arrived to see Leon Kossoff, he told me two things. They fitted together, though in the telling they were broken up by many kindnesses of hospitality: an offer of coffee, a tour of the ground-floor rooms that he uses as his studio.

The first thing he told me was how it was that he began to draw from the great masters. When he was a young man, perhaps still a student, the National Gallery [London] had on loan two great paintings. One was the Rembrandt family group from Brunswick, the other the large Courbet canvas, then entitled, *La toilette de la jeune mariée*, from the Smith College museum. Then one day

they were there no longer: they had gone back. He would never see them again. For those were the days when, as Kossoff quaintly put it, 'we didn't think of travel': quaintly, for he is no traveller nowadays. On the spot he resolved that, whenever in future a great painting came to London, he would draw from it. He would have something to remember it by. That was how it started.

The second thing he told me, a few moments later, was how he painted. He thought that it would be useful for me to know this over the next few hours, and it was. If he was painting a model, he would first do many drawings, then he would paint, and he both drew and painted from the motif.

(cover) *Bacchanal before a herm* 1995-97 (detail)
hand-coloured etching, drypoint
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

(left) *Cephalus and Aurora no.2* 1998
etching, aquatint
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

(above) *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe* 1995
compressed charcoal, pastel
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff



(above) *Cephalus and Aurora after Poussin* 1985
compressed charcoal, pastel
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

(right) *Cephalus and Aurora no.1* 1998
etching Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

By contrast, if he was painting a landscape, and I noticed that he called his city scenes 'landscapes', he would go out in the morning and draw, and then, later that same day, he would paint from the drawings. He always drew and painted very fast, and he completed the painting within the day. He would wait a few days for the paint to settle, then he would carry the painting across the hall into another smaller room, filled with recently done work, which overlooked the garden. He found it useful to keep there a few older works, which served as markers. From time to time he visited the small room, and every time he passed the new painting he allowed a cumulative judgement to grow in his mind. After some weeks, but before the paint surface had completely hardened, he had reached an opinion whether the painting 'worked' or not. If, as in most cases,

he found the painting didn't work, he carried it back to the studio and scraped it down. Some paintings never even reached the small back room: their fate was decided earlier, and they were scraped down on the spot. When a painting was scraped down, Kossoff reprimed the board, and it was ready to be painted on again. Was it always the same subject matter?, I asked. Not necessarily, he answered, from which I gathered that it generally was. What was really important was that under one painting there was the trace, the memory, of another. What he didn't say, but it was something I asked him, was whether what was most important of all was that it was the memory of something that he had done. Yes. Then he corrected me with great courtesy: it was the memory of something that he hadn't done, the memory of something still to be done.



What I had learnt was that the surface of a painting is, or can be, or perhaps should be, related to memory twice over. It is related to the memory of the painter, which it refreshes and it is related to the memory of the painting itself, which it constitutes. Every time that a painting proves inadequate to the painter's memory, it builds up its own memory. And, if the painter's memory is always a specific kind of memory, a memory of particular experiences and of singular things, if it is a memory that tries to capture the impact of the world upon him, the painting's own memory is a very different kind of memory. It is a generalised kind of memory. It is a memory of one repetitive, reiterated process, a process that is never really mastered, never even learnt, a process that has constantly to be unlearnt, and that always must start from scratch if it is to get anywhere.

This is the process of painting: a process otherwise, and more accurately, known as drawing.

During the next few hours, hours of talking and looking, the foundational nature of drawing was a recurrent theme.

It was a damp Sunday morning, with a pale leaden sky hanging over the low houses, when I went to see Kossoff and I went to see him because two weeks before I had gone down to southern California, to Los Angeles, to see two exhibitions of his. There it was arranged that we would meet and talk in London.

Kossoff emphasised to me that he didn't like talking about this work. He had nothing to say, he said. The truth was that he often had a lot to say, but he didn't like being the one to say it. I said that I thought that there were three ways to conduct a conversation between two strangers about what one of them

did. It could be done from the head, or it could be done from the heart, or it could be done on the nerves, and I thought that the last way had the best chances of success. He thought that I understood that taking risks was all-important, and he gave, as I was to discover that he did at such moments, the most delicate, the most thin-skinned, of smiles.

Of the two exhibitions, the first was in the West pavilion of the Getty Museum. On opposite walls were two canvases by Poussin: one extremely well-known, the *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* from the National Gallery, the other less well-known, and reattributed to Poussin only in the 1970s, the pendant to a painting in the Rouen museum, and now itself in the Getty Museum, and called rather awkwardly *Landscape with a calm*. On the side walls were drawings and etchings by Kossoff, which are his responses to these two works.



The Lamentation over the dead Christ no.1 1995
compressed charcoal, pastel
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

Early on I asked Kossoff which preposition he preferred to describe how his work stands to Poussin. 'After', 'from', 'about'? He was firm: 'from', and he elaborated it, 'drawn from'.

The other exhibition is in a smallish room in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art; it contains a selection of Kossoff's work from a variety of Poussin canvases, and they also are drawings and prints. The earliest drawing, which is a very powerful work, is dated 1985.

Kossoff's work from Poussin falls into three broad phases. The first covers the years up to the great Poussin exhibition of 1995, which Londoners saw at the Royal Academy. The second phase covers the work done during and in the aftermath of the exhibition: etching plates created during the exhibition in front of the actual painting were printed from over the next two or three years. The third phase consists of the work begun after the exhibition. It is not a large body of work, nor the most immediately accessible, and it supplied the drawings and prints currently on show at the Getty. A precursor of this phase, and a turning-point for Kossoff, is the big and deeply impressive drawing from the

Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe, which is part of the show at LACMA.

The significance of this drawing comes about in the following way: throughout the first two phases, Kossoff had confined himself to those paintings by Poussin which either were endowed by Poussin with a frieze-like composition, like the *Cephalus and Aurora* and the bacchic paintings in the National Gallery, or, like the late *Eliezer and Rebecca*, could tolerate Kossoff's imposition of such a structure upon them. For Kossoff, a frieze-like composition was not incompatible with some protuberance of the figures into the space this side of the picture-plane. Then, with the *Landscape with Pyramus and Thisbe*, the *Landscape with a man killed by a snake* and the *Landscape with a calm*, Kossoff ventured into new territory. All three paintings bring before our eyes large airy slices of nature with intrusive forms of vegetation barely held at bay, and they recede to a distant background occupied by buildings of great majesty and simplicity, where a new form of habitation is germinating: in writing about Poussin, I called this device the 'landscape behind the landscape'.

When I commented on this turnaround in his work, Kossoff gave an engagingly low-key explanation of why he had not tackled the heavily spatial work of Poussin earlier than he did. These were all late works; as such they were in the last room at Burlington House, and he didn't work his way that far until the exhibition was in its last week. 'I didn't get there in time', he said. He drew from the *Pyramus and Thisbe*, which he experienced as the greatest picture in the exhibition, only once, and that on the last day. If he had had more time, he would have gone on to the *Daphne and Apollo*.

For two initially unrelated reasons, the end of the exhibition did not mean for Kossoff the end of his engagement with Poussin. Resuming his regular visits to the National Gallery, Kossoff found himself ready to come to grips with *Landscape with a man killed by a snake*, a painting which had haunted him, and which, he told me, he had struggled with for 40 years, but which he still found extremely elusive. A drawing of great freedom, presumably one of many, dates from 1997. Then in 1999, John Walsh, the Director of the Getty Museum, tried to get Kossoff to



The Lamentation over the dead Christ 1998
etching. Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

come out to Santa Monica to work after the museum's new Poussin. When it was clear that this was out of the question, the *Landscape with a calm* was lent to the National Gallery, and Kossoff was allowed to work on it alone in the evenings. However, he encountered many difficulties, some of which were undoubtedly to do with the intense stillness that the painting exudes, others with its format, which went so conspicuously against everything that Kossoff had been doing in his own work, at least in recent years. In order to engineer a breakthrough, he moved backwards and forwards between it and the *Landscape with a man killed by a snake*. Making use of the fact that they were both painted for the same patron, Pointel, he came to think of them as companion pictures. One triumph of this phase is the magnificent etching with much aquatint which Kossoff did after the National Gallery painting in 1999. When I said to Kossoff in Los Angeles that I thought that the shadow of the Pyramus and Thisbe drawing hung over this print, he smiled and said something that I was to hear him say in London, and that I learnt to understand: 'I wasn't thinking of it at the time.'

Later he agreed with me on this point.

It is only to be expected that the 'learning experience', as Kossoff calls it, of working from these two paintings with their deep space will not go away. It will outlive his working from Poussin. His mind is leading in that direction, he thought.

The Burlington House exhibition accounted for the lion's share of the work on show in Los Angeles. Kossoff had already seen the exhibition at the Grand Palais by going to Paris for the day and, when it came to London, he got permission to get into it before it was officially open to the public. He instituted an impressive regime.

The day before he was due to visit the exhibition, he worked from a model. On the day itself, he woke up in an excited state around half past four or five o'clock. He then prepared himself for what lay ahead by doing drawings, mostly with a felt-tip pen, from reproductions of Poussin's drawings: he drew from drawings. After an hour or more of this work, he left the house in time to catch the six o'clock tube to the Embankment station so as to arrive at Burlington House by half past six.

He made the journey heavily encumbered: he was carrying a large drawing board, possibly one or two etching plates of copper or zinc (if there were two, the weight required that one was zinc), pastels, charcoal sticks, printmaking materials (if he had got to that stage), and rags so as to be able to clean up any mess he had made on the floor before the public arrived at nine. Sometimes he stayed until nine, but frequently he left earlier. If he was still getting to know a painting, he made many drawings in front of it, often completed in a few minutes so as to capture the distinctive experience. Only when repeated drawing had given him sufficient understanding of the picture did he start on the etching plate. At this stage, some of the details of the picture, and frequently its original proportions, which had slipped out of the drawings, were reinstated.

Printing from the plate was another matter, and, as we have seen, it was often postponed, and then dragged out over many months. A number of prints pulled from plates made in 1995 are dated 1997 or 1998. A number of states were never edited, and we know them only through a series of very diverse artist's proofs,



often adjusted with watercolour to the most scintillating effect. However, it would be wrong to think that Kossoff had spent the interim probing the deeper secrets of the craft. On the contrary, his aim was to avoid the richness and the heavy sonorities of fine printmaking, which are beloved by dealers and connoisseurs, and so he worked at this stage, not with a professional printmaker but with another artist, Anne Dowker. What he asked for from his prints was that they should retain the freshness and the immediacy of drawing.

After the prints came a few paintings from Poussin, but they did not get to Los Angeles, and, in a way, they may belong to a different stream within Kossoff's work.

The question cannot be avoided: Why Poussin? Why did Kossoff ever think of working from Poussin? What led him to go on doing so? What is there between these two artists?

This is a question that needs an answer even if we fully concede the point that Kossoff put to me by saying — and he said it both in California and in England — that, for all the sizeable body of work on display in Los Angeles, as well as the much larger body of drawings and artist's proofs and prints that I saw bulging out of chests of drawers in London, Poussin was never centre stage for him. Centre stage for him had always been — and this is what the work might seem to confirm — Rembrandt, Frans Hals, Velázquez, early Cézanne, late Cézanne, early van Gogh.

In the Foreword to *Drawn to Painting*, a beautifully illustrated study of Kossoff's work from Poussin 'published on the occasion of the exhibitions', the former Director of LACMA writes that it might be 'difficult to think of a more unlikely pairing' than Poussin and Kossoff. This is a plausible thing to say if, but only if, we accept one particular view of Poussin, the view advanced by, for instance, Anthony Blunt, which has a substantial following, and which sees Poussin as a painter totally dedicated to the classical values of clarity, order and rationality. However, start to recognise in Poussin, as I think we should, someone who not only was sensitive to the darker passions of humanity, but was aware of a correspondence between these passions and untamed nature, and strove to give



visual expression to this correspondence in many many paintings, and the situation changes. Then it might seem as though there is an affinity of a sort between the two artists.

But this view is not without its difficulties — difficulties that, in some measure, come from Kossoff, and what he is reported as saying.

Richard Kendall, the author of *Drawn to Painting*, recounts how, when Kossoff first started going to the National Gallery, he was not drawn to Poussin: he looked at Poussin — and passed by. Then, one day in the early 1960s, he found himself in front of *Cephalus and Aurora*, and suddenly the picture was transformed for him, and he by it. For the first time, he 'experienced' it, as opposed to merely looking at it.

And it was from this moment onwards that Kossoff 'came to understand' that Poussin was an artist who rewarded a heightened attention.

There is, I cannot help feeling, something in this anecdote that calls for adjustment. *Cephalus and Aurora*, which shows the mortal Cephalus trying to struggle free from the amorous embraces of the goddess Aurora, and finding the energy to do so in the contemplation of a portrait of his wife Procris, which a putto holds up to his gaze, is, I believe, a sublime painting, but it is not an easy picture to see. This is because the paint, though still beautiful in quality, and delicate in touch and sentiment, has, over the years, considerably retreated into the support. Accordingly, I think that anyone who,

(left) *The Rape of the Sabines no.1* 1998
etching Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

(above) *The Rape of the Sabines no.1* 1995–97
hand-coloured etching, drypoint
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff



Bacchanal before a herm 1995-97
hand-coloured etching, drypoint
Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

on his own, has the kind of transforming experience in front of this painting that Kossoff clearly had must, knowingly or unknowingly, have already been drawn to Poussin; or, at the least, must straightway have surrendered to some kinship that he recognises in himself with the artist. When Kossoff said that he had never noticed the aspect of the painting that I was referring to, I took this to confirm my view. I thought it suggested that, from the very beginning, as if in immediate response to some power that it exerted over him, Kossoff gave the painting the kind of heightened attention that required no apprenticeship.

But there still remains the question of what the ground of this power was. Kendall reports Kossoff as saying that what drew him to the canvases of Poussin was 'their pictorial rather than their thematic character'. It was 'the interplay of mass, space and line' from which he wished to learn. If these were Kossoff's words, and he confirmed that they were, how can his words be reconciled with the works themselves and what they show us? How can this seemingly formalist declaration be reconciled with the way in which, in the more remarkable drawings, Kossoff so evidently strains every nerve in

his arm and hand to catch the gravity of the Dublin *Lamentation*, or the sense of desolation that strikes at Thisbe as she finds the dead Pyramus in a pool of glimmering light, or the unbearable power of love as it tears Cephalus from the arms of one woman and restores him to those of another? Words and work seem at obvious loggerheads.

Sitting in Kossoff's darkened studio, where the paint as it slopped over the sides of the tin formed a mossy texture anticipatory of the paintings it was to be used to create, I felt that everything spoke of the power of human expression over its material vehicle. In consequence, I could not believe that Kossoff's words were to be understood in a purely formalist way. He could not be telling us that he was indebted to Poussin for his 'geometry'. How then were his words to be understood?

What I felt he was saying was that, when he looked at Poussin, or, for that matter, when a spectator looked at one of his works from Poussin, what lay before him, though it certainly wasn't something to be seen merely as a configuration of paint that it presented to the eyes, was equally not something that could be understood merely through

the story that it represented. 'Merely' is the operative word. For, however moving any story might be in the telling — and Kossoff was not impervious to the judgement of Solomon, or the fate of Cephalus, or the death of Eudamidas — the meaning of any visual object that embodied that story was always a matter of how the story had been retold in paint. It depended upon how 'mass, space and line' had been recruited into giving the picture a meaning, and recruited in a way that could never have been predicted from a mere material knowledge of these resources.

As to what, in the case of any given painting, could be said about its meaning, Kossoff showed himself naturally inclined to stall, and never more so than when the painting was by himself. When I put various suggestions to him about his Poussin works, he would say things like, 'It never occurred to me', 'I was quite unaware of that', 'I had no such conscious idea'. And, in saying these things, he seemed the first to agree that, had there been such ideas, had certain thoughts consciously occurred to him while he was painting, this would not have been a matter of major



The Judgement of Solomon no.2 1995
compressed charcoal Collection of the artist © Leon Kossoff

importance. For most probably these thoughts, these ideas, would not have been those which gave meaning to his work. What he was really saying was: Let the paintings speak for themselves.

Then, in the middle of it all, he volunteered something. I don't know whether he and I would agree on what it was that he volunteered.

I had been talking to him about the affective appeal that it seemed to me so obvious that a certain kind of twisting figure had for him, a figure that turns away from something that cannot be tolerated, such as Cephalus turning away from the love that Aurora offers him, or the left-hand figure in the Dublin *Lamentation* turning away from the dead body of Christ. I felt he was about to say that he knew nothing about what this special significance might be, when instead he asked me if I read much Kundera. Did I know a novel in the opening chapter of which a woman of 50 or so, who has been having a swimming lesson with a young lifeguard, gets out of the water and waves goodbye to him. As she does so, she makes a gesture. It is 'a gesture that makes it seem she's still twenty-five, and he is interested in her'. Kossoff went on, 'Something happens: time collapses, something happens.'

Then he brought the subject back to painting. 'It's the same in painting. You're painting a model you're so familiar with that you're struggling, and you're saying, "Can you keep your eyes open?", and she moves, she makes a gesture, and you know you can do something you've never done before. Space is displaced.' He paused. By the displacement of space Kossoff made it clear that he meant, not just an outward change in the appearance of things, or the kind of change that a formalist could note. It was the kind of change that brought with it surprise, and the kind of surprise went with a recognition of something new, something that could be learnt about the world or about oneself. Without such surprise, you might as well be dead. Or, as Kossoff put it, 'You might as well not bother.'

I did not want to leave the matter there. Did he think that the gesture that the woman in Kundera's novel made, that the gesture a model might make, that the gestures Poussin makes his figures make, gestures that transcend their formal beauty, all go back for their appeal to the way in which they touch upon deep feelings of ours, and that it is these feelings that great paintings can incorporate. At this point, Kossoff said after a pause, 'That's quite possible.'

I made a number of further suggestions about the significance that different features in Poussin might have had for Kossoff, and thus for his transcriptions of Poussin, and many met with rejection. But he expressed a measure of agreement when I tried, but perhaps without success, to formulate something that I had felt very powerfully in Los Angeles. The feeling was that the way in which Poussin envisaged primordial nature, as some powerful, overwhelming force, which was nevertheless that out of which man snatched order and reason, found its counterpart in Kossoff. But it didn't find a counterpart in the field of representation. It found it in the no less unruly jungle of pen and charcoal marks, which was for Kossoff the precondition, the primordial chaos, out of which the image could be made to emerge.

And then, towards the end of our conversation, in the fifth hour or so, I introduced a new topic. In Poussin, I said, a very powerful point of detail, recurrent in many paintings, and always signifying (if I might put it like that) calm and hope, is water, and its reflecting surface. In the two paintings from which he had so recently been working, there were these great deposits of water,

the lakes with their mirror-like surfaces, and it seemed to me, from the way Kossoff had altered their shapes, tilting them somewhat towards the viewer, that they had some additional meaning for him. Did he feel this?

I was surprised by the force and alacrity with which he responded. He began by talking of some of the earliest paintings he had painted, done when he was 13, 14, at King's Lynn, where he had been evacuated, and 'water did come into it quite a bit'. Later he had painted swimming pools. Then he remembered to fence. I must realise that what I saw was simply what I saw. I said, possibly, but then possibly not, for possibly what I saw was also what he had done. Suddenly, as though he was taking up what I had just said, I heard Kossoff say, 'Everything can melt, and yet stay strong', and I asked him why he said that, and he said, wasn't that true of a dozen great 'late' paintings, of Titian, of Picasso? He remarked on the 'sympathy' of paint, of paint ground in oil, for water.

I said to him that I thought that there was in Poussin's fascination with water an element that was no part of Kossoff's own interest in water, and that was Poussin's concern for reflections: those things which always come straight towards one, and that carry a true picture of the world. 'Reflections', he took up the word before it was out of my mouth, 'I was always obsessed by reflections when I was young. Bridges, I used to paint bridges, everywhere, country bridges. But that was a long time ago.'

We ended on that note. But, a little earlier, when he had said that my original reference to water was an interesting observation, letting drop that he regretted there was so little calm and hope in his own work, he told me that,

after he had finished with Poussin, he had gone back to the National Gallery in some sort of desperation, and had worked from some other painters, including Rubens, and he had also done two prints after Constable's *Salisbury Cathedral*. He would show me them, and I would see that they had a lot of water in them, they were 'watery'. So, the talking at an end, we went back for the last time across the hallway to another room looking out onto the garden, and there, in the shadow of a large painting he had just finished, he pulled out of a drawer a number of artist's proofs of the new prints. He went to great pains to find the best sheets to show me. The cathedral was like an enormous boat beached on the water meadows. Above it was a simplified rainbow like a great elephant's tusk, and then in the immediate foreground was the river, with figures wading through it, which had its surface troubled by hatched strokes and little curlicues and large, tonally distinct, patches of darkness, indicating shadow, and sedge, and reflection. The two prints were triumphant works of great intensity, and of a Poussin-like complexity.

At various points, Kossoff has talked of Poussin as at, or near, the end of a line. The line that Kossoff is thinking of is one that starts in the Renaissance, and what is distinctive about it is that painting is a continuation of drawing. Kossoff's work after Poussin can be seen as, in the most literal way, an attempt to project that line forward into the late 20th century. Poussin draws, Poussin paints, Kossoff draws, Kossoff etches, Kossoff paints.

We all know of another painter who tried to make of himself a continuation of Poussin, though he projected the line that ran through both

of them somewhat differently. He did so in order at once to escape from himself and to return to himself, the second being for him no less important than the first. By the time Sunday afternoon had drawn to a close, I felt that this last theme had become familiar. We must never forget that 'centre stage' for Kossoff is, not only late Cézanne, but also early Cézanne: not only the Cézanne who sought purification from all early turbulence, but the turbulent Cézanne, who is never far away from the great bathers.

There might seem a certain unfairness in concluding an essay on Kossoff's work after one great master with what might seem like a comparison to another great master. But I do not think that Kossoff himself would see any such imputation with that. With me he was always adamant that the Poussin work was not, and should not be, regarded as a 'demonstration', and by this I took him to mean that it was not a claim to a certain status. It was not, at any rate for him, like Picasso's variations on Velázquez: it was not a way of saying, 'I can do that.' Kossoff's word for what he was doing was a 'learning-process'. Of course, the modesty of intent does not prejudice the level of the accomplishment. But, by the time I said goodbye to Kossoff, I had the distinct impression that what Kossoff most feared was being misunderstood about the intent. Grandiosity was furthest from his mind. 'It opens doors for you to go on with your own work, or it's nothing.' He dropped his voice, and, not for the first time, he asked me, but not waiting for the answer, 'Does that make sense?'

This is a slightly expanded version of an essay which originally appeared in *Modern Painters* with the approval of the artist.

Drawn to Painting

Leon Kossoff drawings and prints after Nicolas Poussin

17 March - 17 June 2001

Orde Poynton Gallery

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