

LÉVI-STRAUSS ON POUSSIN

Cambridge Companion to Lévi-Strauss.

by

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Example of a pictorial analysis of Claude Lévi-Strauss in *Regarder, Écouter, Lire*. Analyzing certain paintings by Poussin Lévi-Strauss calls several times upon the structural principle of non-genericity.

We will focus here on his analysis of the masterpiece *Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well* (1648, Louvre Museum, Paris).

It represents a biblical episode of Genesis XXIV : having arrived in the promised land of Canaan, Abraham does not want his son Isaac to marry an autochthonous daughter of the soil but « a daughter of his blood » and dispatches Eliezer, his oldest servant, to his home country (Ur in Chaldea) to bring back a wife. Rebecca is the daughter of Bethuel, the son of Abraham's brother Nachor, and the sister of Laban. God's Angel announced to Eliezer that he would recognize the right virgin he was searching for by the fact she would water his camels after having supplied him with drink.

Poussin represented the next moment, when Eliezer gives her the golden ring and the two bracelets.

Lévi-Strauss emphasizes the organic character of the composition and the fact that it operates at

three levels of organization, one nested in the other, each raised to the same degree of perfection (p. 24) :

first the figures, each one being « as profoundly thought out as the whole » (p. 34), then the groups of figures and finally the picture in its entirety (figure 2).



Figure 2. Nicolas Poussin, Eliezer and Rebecca at the Well, Paris, Louvre Museum. (Photo R.M.N.)

This compositional hierarchy leading from internally structured « first-order » units to higher-order structures is fundamental for Lévi-Strauss, who sees at work in it the universal structural principle of *double articulation* characteristic of all constructions with meaning:

Poussin illustrates above all the procedure of double articulation (p. 13).

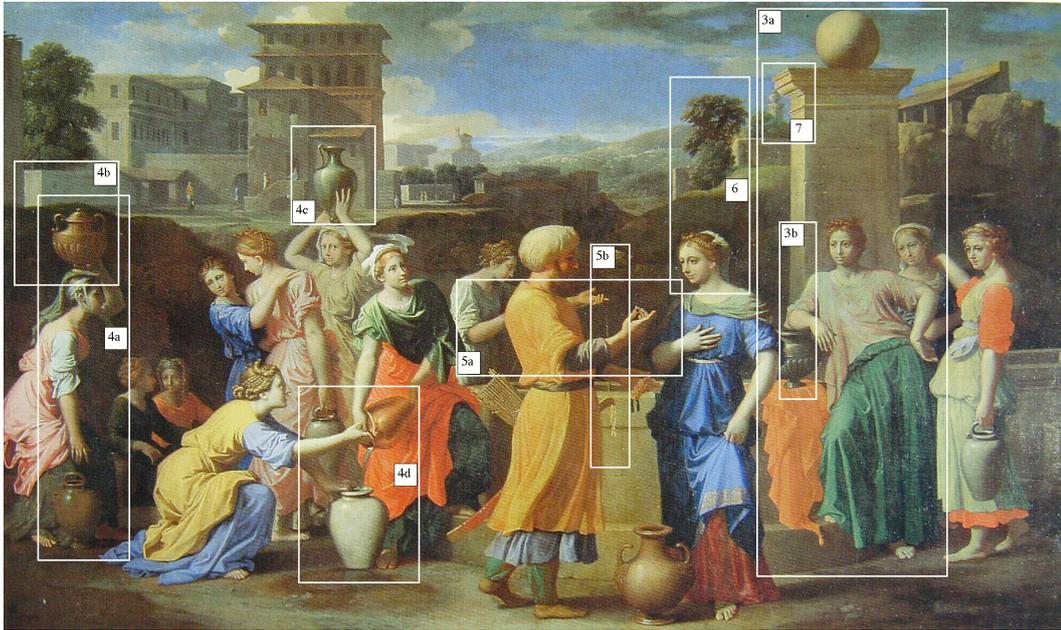
In a painting by Poussin no part is unequal to the whole. Each is a masterpiece of the same stature which, considered on its own, is as worthy of attention as the rest. The picture thus appears as a second-order organization of forms of organization already present in the smallest details (p. 34).

Lévi-Strauss starts out from the structure made up of groups of figures:

- (i) in the foreground, the couple formed by Eliezer and Rebecca;
- (ii) to the left, a « compact and lively » (p. 25) group of nine women (structured as $(5 + 1) + 1 + 2$);
- (iii) to the right, a group of three more hieratic women.

And he makes the fundamental observation *that one figure is selected by the fact that it is prolonged by a pillar*. He formulates the matter most precisely, speaking

of the pillar of masonry (...) surmounted by a sphere, against which the woman is silhouetted and to which she almost seems attached (p. 26).



This selection is achieved by a procedure of *non-genericity*. The perspective is chosen in such a way that the elbow of the right arm leaning above the edge of the well (the distinctive position of the figure) is *exactly tangent to the edge* of the pillar. The effect of non-genericity is further reinforced by the fact that the side of the pillar seen in perspective appears as a narrow band that is exactly prolonged by the neck and the base of the jug; moreover, this alignment precisely divides the elbow from the body of the figure (cf. figure 3).



Figure 3. The pillar-woman leaning over the well and selected by her non-generic position with respect to the pillar. The side of the pillar in view selects her elbow before being prolonged by the neck and the base of the jug.

This non-generic construction *selects* a figure and imposes, in a structural and immanent manner, independent of any external content, the *identification* « leaning woman = pillar ». And Lévi-Strauss states:

It is true that this sculptural figure is in sharp contrast with the others. I believe this calculated difference holds the key to the painting (p. 24).

Indeed, once one has recognized this first identification, one immediately notices that there exists a vertical correspondence between the three groups of figures and the architectural or landscape components of the scenery:

Figures	Left-hand group	Central couple	Right-hand group
Scenery	Palatial buildings	Distant landscape	Pillar and manufactory

As a veteran anthropologist, Lévi-Strauss asserts that this episode stages the conflict between blood and soil or, more precisely,

the contradiction between what the jurists of the Old Regime called race and land (p. 25).

If we identify the women with « race » and the buildings with « land », then the painting immediately acquires, through its very composition and organization and the immanent properties of its structure, an intrinsic meaning apart from any extrinsic hermeneutic projection.

With regard to Poussin's compositional genius, Lévi-Strauss makes the following startling remark:

In one precise point in the picture, Poussin furnishes, formulated in plastic terms, the solution to the problem (p. 26).

First of all, the form and tone of the selected figure make it appear to be more a statue than a character, so that it

realizes the synthesis of an effigy which is still human (and thus of a piece with « race ») and a pillar of masonry (already « land ») (p. 26).

But the most startling facet of this assertion is the idea *that a conceptual problem can have a plastic solution*. Yet that is precisely what composition accomplishes: by introducing singular spatial relations between terms naturally invested with meanings (here, the « race » and the « land »), it spatializes relations and tells a philosophical tale through the composition itself.

Lévi-Strauss makes several other observations about this painting.

(i) The left-hand group is lively, the right-hand group immobile and the buildings immutable; thus,

seen as a whole, the picture plays on an opposition between stable and unstable, mobile and immobile (p. 25).

(ii) This opposition is amplified by the parallel between the woman on the left (Rebecca's double) carrying an unstable jug on her head and the pillar-woman on the right whose column-body supports a stable sphere.

(iii) Finally, concerning the configuration of the jugs, Lévi-Strauss notes the existence of

a triangle formed by the jug that she [the woman on the right] is carrying on her head (unstable), the jug beneath her (or that of Rebecca) resting on the ground (stable),

and the jug upon which the statuesque figure is leaning,
located at an intermediate height (p. 26).

One might add some further observations:

(i) The extraordinary interplay of the nine jugs, joined by the 10th which is the sphere, relative to the nine women:

(a) at the far left, a figure is associated, by an opposition between her arms, to two vertically superimposed jugs, one on the head (unstable) — exactly tangent to the horizontal borderline between the upper part of the immediate background and the bottom of the wall in the distant background — and the other on the ground (stable);

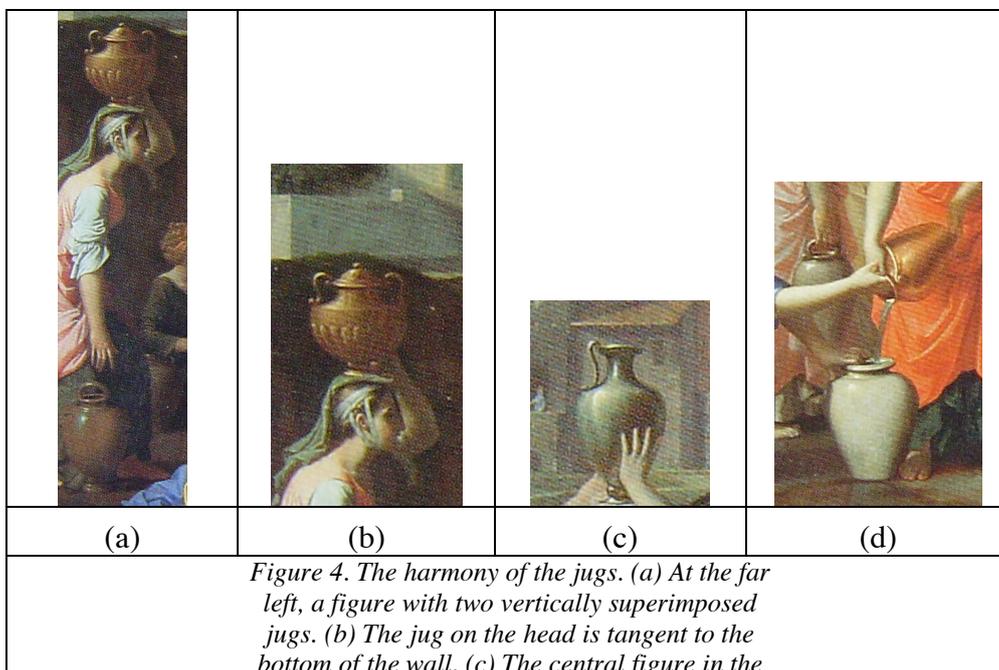
(b) the group of two figures sitting in the shade is leaning on a jug;

(c) next, in the group of five figures (really only four, since the two holding each other's shoulders make up a single split figure), the central figure, the only one facing the viewer, is carrying on her head a jug exactly framed by one of the façades of the building, while the three other jugs are interlaced near the ground in an extraordinary trinity;

(d) Rebecca's jug is resting on the ground between Eliezer and Rebecca;

(e) the pillar-woman's jug corresponds to the sphere;

(f) and, finally, the duo at the far right connected by an arm around the shoulder corresponds to a jug held at arm's length (which embodies a stable position symmetrical to the unstable one of a jug carried on the head) (cf. figure 4).



group on the left supports a jug exactly framed by one of the façades. (d) The three jugs on the left side are intertwined to form a trinity.

(ii) The no less extraordinary interplay of positions, especially of the arms. One will notice in particular the left arm of the woman standing behind and to the left of Eliezer. The hand, which precisely prolongs her right forearm and is seen behind Eliezer's body to his right, is automatically placed in correspondence with Eliezer's right hand, which points toward Rebecca. These two hands are parallel and their positions are very similar. That of the woman is holding the rope of the well, which is precisely prolonged by the braid on the hilt of Eliezer's sword (cf. figure 5). The fingers' positions are also particularly interesting. With his right hand Eliezer at once points toward Rebecca with his index and gives her the golden ring he holds between his thumb and his middle finger. With his left hand he gives Rebecca the two bracelets. With her left hand, the woman behind him at once points toward the golden ring with her index and holds the rope with her other fingers.



Figure 5. The hand holding the rope of the well is horizontally parallel to that of Eliezer and the rope is vertically prolonged by the braid on the sword-hilt.

(iii) The essentially horizontal and vertical organization of the picture. The 14 figures (9+1+1+3 from left to right) are distributed in a very open triangle pointing toward the viewer (positions of the feet), and there are an ascending series of horizontal lines along which the jugs are arrayed like notes on a musical scale.

(iv) Standing above Rebecca there is a tree which must be placed in relation with the other trees, the complementarity stone/tree being an essential feature of the scenery (cf. figure 6).



Figure 6. The tree and the elements of masonry above Rebecca's head.

(v) Other elements of the scenery such as the church, in the middle, off in the distance, and above all the second pillar, also in the distance, which the chosen perspective has made exactly tangent to the capital of the first pillar, an example of maximal non-genericity (cf. figure 7).



Figure 7. The two pillars made tangent by a powerful perspective effect of non-genericity

NON-GENERICITY AND 3-D → 2-D PROJECTIONS

With regard to Poussin's method of composition, Lévi-Strauss recalls that the painter constructed three-dimensional mock-ups (maquettes) of his pictures so as to be able to move about « wax figurines » on « small boards », clothing them in wet paper and taffeta, and that he enclosed these scenes in boxes pierced with holes, allowing him to project light upon the scenes and to analyze the shadows (p. 15). Lévi-Strauss considers this to be a

method of composition so perfectly assimilated that it nearly ends up being a mode of thinking (p. 15).

This method was criticized, among others, by Delacroix, for the fact that

Poussin's figures are set down one next to the other as if they were statues (quoted p. 14).

But I would like to stress the fact that this method of varying *projections* of a 3-D scene on the 2-D plane of the canvas is the technique *par excellence* for obtaining non-generic dispositions.