The Painting: "The Triumph of Neptune & Amphitrite"

The French baroque artist Nicole Poussin created this work for Cardinal Richelieu, who was Louis XIII's minister. It is oil on canvas, ca. 1634, and currently resides at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. In the past there was debate as to the characters portrayed. It has always been agreed that the male figure is Poseidon/Neptune (the use of either Greek/Roman naming depends on who you ask), but the main female figure has been somewhat obscure. Some believe it is Venus, but this does not go along with the intended story Poussin intended to portray. This scene depicts the marriage of the sea god to Amphitrite, the daughter of Oceanus. At first she rejected his advances. She was finally convinced when the god sent dolphins, who supposedly persuaded her to agree to the match.

Specifically the scene shows Neptune (right) arising from the sea pulled by teeming horses. Cherubs fly overhead shooting arrows or dropping celebratory flowers. Amphitrite and the other women are painted nude lounging on a beach. They catch the light, while Neptune is seen as shaded and powerful. In one hand he holds his famous trident, controlling the horses with the other. The shading throws his muscles into relief, and adds a rugged component to his persona. Compared to the paler, less defined female figures, his presence is commanding. He is pushed to the side rather than central, but the scene is surrounded by his main element (water), which suggests that he is all encompassing in the scene. He is not the only male figure, but he is the only one in the foreground and takes command as the tallest and largest. The women similarly compose most of the foreground and thus seem to be only associated with him rather than to all the other men in the picture. This would have lent itself to his perceived manhood in the ancient world as the women (who I would suggest are representative of fertility) are all artistically (formally) correlated with Neptune.

I find it interesting that Poussin chose to paint Neptune/Poseidon as a more mature man with salt and pepper hair. This is an aspect of mythological paintings that is inconsistent. While the members of the Pantheon are immortal, there are several different opinions as to the ages of the different lines of gods (Zeus generation vs those of the resulting gods, e.g. Dionysus). More often than not, the gods in primary roles of power (Zeus, Hades, Poseidon) are seen as older than their counterparts. In my opinion this older age would have added to the respect Neptune calls for - age tends to consistently be an automatic earner of respect, and it seems as if this was true of Greece. For example, there was the Council of Elders in Sparta, and the odd but didactic organization of pederasty. Thus, it would appear that this was a purposeful choice by Poussin to best illustrate the character he (and most likely his patron) felt Neptune personifies. During my presentation, I used this portrayed power as part of my evidence for the Greek fear of the sea despite their dependence on it. Moving forward, I will attempt to look at this piece from the same focus, as well as through other lenses that lean more towards warfare.