

PRIMARY TEACHERS' NOTES

THE MARQUISE DE SEIGNELAY
AND TWO OF HER SONS
PIERRE MIGNARD



'THE MARQUISE DE SEIGNELAY AND TWO OF HER SONS' BY PIERRE MIGNARD (1612 – 1695)



The picture is 194 x 155 cm. It was painted in oils on canvas in 1691

These notes have been produced by National Gallery Education for teachers using 'The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons' across the primary curriculum. In these notes you will find: information about the painting; information about the artist; suggestions for classroom activities; curriculum links.

Cross-curricular work produced in schools, based on 'The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons', will be shown in an exhibition at the National Gallery in 2006 as part of the Gallery's Take One Picture project. An online exhibition will also be shown on the **Take One Picture** website (www.takeonepicture.org.uk). Schools wishing to have their work considered should contact National Gallery Education in September 2005 to register their interest. Continuing Professional Development courses, entitled **Framing the Curriculum**, take place throughout the academic year 2004/05. As well as looking at 'The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons' in detail, they focus on general principles of working with images in the classroom. For more details and to book a place on a course please telephone 020 7747 2844.

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Who's in this picture?

This elaborate portrait shows Catherine-Thérèse de Matignon-Thorigny, the Marquise de Seignelay. She was a seventeenth-century French noblewoman who had recently been widowed. In this portrait, she appears with two of her five children. They are probably her eldest son, Marie-Jean-Baptiste, and her youngest boy, Théodore-Alexandre. The family are wearing costumes, and sit in an imaginary seaside setting. Pierre Mignard painted their picture in 1691 – he's signed the painting in the bottom right hand corner, using the latin word 'pinxit', meaning 'painted this'

Why are they wearing fancy dress?

The Marquise and her sons are all dressed up as characters from ancient mythology. There was quite a fashion for this kind of portrait, as it was flattering - who wouldn't want to be shown as a hero or a goddess? It meant your portrait was timeless, too, as you weren't wearing clothes that soon looked dated. It also allowed sitters to communicate certain messages about themselves. The Marquise appears as the sea goddess Thetis, wearing classical robes and swathed in deep blue fabric that suggests the depths of the ocean. Coral, reeds and pearls are entwined with her hair to make a sea-themed tiara, and beautifully painted shells lie on the shore at her feet. Some of the shells are imaginary, but others are fine specimens from around the world. The shell on the far left is called 'voluta musica', and it comes from the Caribbean.

Dressing up as a sea goddess was partly a way for the Marquise to honour her husband's achievements. Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Colbert de Seignelay had been the head of the French navy, developing the fleet and seeing active service himself. He died the year before this portrait was made, and the marine theme paid homage to his career. The Marquise holds up a locket on a pearl necklace; perhaps this contained his portrait. Behind it is a smoking volcano, which might refer to a French naval victory at Agosta, opposite Mount Etna (a volcano on Sicily), on 22 April 1676.

However, dressing up as Thetis also sends out other messages about the Marquise. One is that she is a devoted mother. This idea is underlined by the fact that her eldest boy appears as Achilles, the son that Thetis adored. He's wearing armour, and a helmet and shield are on the ground behind him. This marks him out as the famous Greek hero of the Trojan War.

The Marquise's friends (and enemies) at the French court would all have known the stories told of Achilles and Thetis in classical texts, like Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' and Homer's 'Iliad'. Those less interested in learned books might also have seen the musical play Thetis and Peleus, published in 1689. Thetis was told that she would conceive a son who would outdo all of his father's deeds, but who would be fated to die if he went to Troy. She was ambitious for her son, and did everything she could to protect him. That included bravely descending into the fiery crater of Mount Etna, to get special armour made by Hephaestus, god of fire. This is why we see the elder boy dressed in armour, and is another reason why there is a smoking

volcano in the background of the painting. The implication is that the Marquise de Seignelay would go to similar lengths for the good of her son. Indeed, when this portrait was made, she had just purchased a military commission for her eldest boy, even though he was still only nine years old. Her youngest son, Théodore-Alexandre, is naked except for a piece of brilliant scarlet drapery. He has wings and a quiver full of arrows, clear signals that he appears as Cupid, god of Love. He hands his mother a cup made from a shell mounted on a gold stand, filled with pearls and coral. His mythological guise was probably intended to send out a general message about love and wealth, since he doesn't fit into the stories of Thetis and Achilles (Cupid wasn't another of Thetis' children).

A lonely heart?

The Marquise may well have wanted to communicate the idea that she is rich, beautiful and looking for love at this point in her life. When her husband died, she was, according to Madame de Sévigné, 'inconsolable'. However, according to the Duc de Saint-Simon (who wrote an account of life in the court of Louis XIV at Versailles) 'she was consumed with desire for a rank and another name, although she had several children'. Arrangements had been made for her to marry the Duc de Luxembourg, but then he jilted her, so she had to start looking again. There were rumours at court that she was nearly bankrupt; her decision to commission this large, costly painting was a way of silencing her critics with a display of her spending power. Her blue robe was painted with large quantities of ultramarine, the most expensive colour pigment available.

Having Cupid in the picture adds the suggestion of romance, and Mignard has represented the Marquise as a woman of considerable beauty according to the ideals of the day. Her right foot rests on a large scallop shell, usually the symbol of the goddess Venus – it's not a very respectful action, and suggests that she considers herself even more lovely than Venus. X-radiographs show that originally, the Marquise's neckline was much lower, revealing her right breast. Some women did go that far when they dressed up as mythological characters, but perhaps the Marquise decided in the end that it wasn't appropriate for her.

Who was the artist?

Pierre Mignard was born in Troyes in 1612, and died in Paris in 1695. He painted portraits, decorated the interiors of grand buildings, and made religious pictures, including delicate images of the Virgin and Child that were known as 'Mignardes'. This was a joke on his name, since the French word 'mignard' means 'dainty' or, less flatteringly, 'affected'. He worked in Italy for twenty-two years at the beginning of his career, studying the idealised figures and bright colours of the work of Italian painters. When he returned to France, Mignard didn't join the professional body of artists, the Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture, for many years, because it was dominated by his great rival, the painter Charles Le Brun. However, when Le Brun died in 1690, Mignard was appointed the Académie's rector, as well as being named First Painter to the King – this was the most prestigious post that a French artist could hold at the time. So, when the Marquise de Seignelay commissioned him to paint her portrait in 1691, he was the most important artist in the country.

Using the picture in the classroom

A zoomable image of the painting is available on the National Gallery website www.nationalgallery.org.uk. For group work this can be used in the classroom on an interactive whiteboard. Small details, sometimes difficult to see in the original, can be enlarged and explored together. For individual work a large printed reproduction is useful. A print of the image will be given to those teachers attending the Gallery's CPD courses. It can be displayed on a classroom wall, perhaps in a quiet corner where students can record their own reactions to the painting using a comment book, a 'thought wall' or a tape recorder. Extra prints can be purchased from the Gallery shop or by mail order on 0207747 2870 or mailorder@nationalgallery.co.uk.

Using 'The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons' across the National Curriculum

For ten years the National Gallery has been promoting how a single image can be used to stimulate work across the primary curriculum with the Take One Picture project. This principle aligns closely with the DfES Primary Strategy: Excellence and Enjoyment, which supports a holistic approach to the curriculum exploiting the links between subject areas.

Some suggestions:

- With the aim of developing speaking, listening and learning skills, group discussions can be started with questions such as:
 - Do the people in the picture look like they are from our time or from the past? (link to History)
 - What do the clothes tell us about the sitters? (visual literacy links to Art)
- Is the background real or imaginary?
- Learn about the Greek myths referred to in the painting and 'write a story plan for your own myth' (NLS).
- Produced written work based on themes such as Disguise and Fantasy (NLS).
- Make connections to the MFL framework unit 'En Famille' (MFL).
- Find out the French words for the objects in the painting (MFL).
- Link to the NNS and learn to count the objects in French (MFL).
- Ask the students to think about which character from a story they would like to be dressed up as, and why. Costumes could be designed on paper and/or made up (CDT).
- Make a scientific enquiry in to the different materials represented (Science).
- Make a comparative study of two localities; the school area and a place in France (Geography).
- Link to ICT by emailing 'The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Sons' to a school in France, asking them to share their thoughts about it.
- Make a geographical enquiry in to volcanoes (Geography)
- Use the painting as a starting point for discussing how our communities are made up of a variety of different types of families (PSHE).