illustrate a passage from the Gospel of Saint Matthew: 'Then were there brought unto him little children, that he should put his hands on them, and pray: and the disciples rebuked them. But Jesus said, Suffer little children, and forbid them not, to come unto me: for of such is the kingdom of heaven' (19:13–14).

In Maes's picture dark browns and blacks are enlivened with touches of cream and red – most striking in the cheeks of the little girl on whom Jesus has 'put his hands', and who turns around shyly and uncomprehendingly, finger in mouth. Her school slate hangs at her side – for these are seventeenth-century Dutch mothers and children who crowd around Jesus, although he, like Saint Peter standing rebuked behind the tree and the man lifting up the child (a disciple removing an infant, or a father jumping the queue?), is wearing 'timeless' dress. The young man awkwardly squeezed in at the left is likely to be a self portrait, a reminder that this picture is dated to Maes's late 'teens. He has followed all the precepts for monumental narrative painting – the full-length figures on the scale of life, a significant and elevated biblical story, the poses and emotions of all the figures carefully delineated, the lights and darks disposed so as to highlight Jesus and the children – yet something genre-like and sentimental keeps breaking through. Whether because most patrons with space on their walls for a canvas of this size wanted something loftier than the homely figures depicted here, or whether Maes himself realised that 'history painting' was not what he wished to do, he was never again to attempt a picture on this ambitious scale.

Pierre Mignard 1612–1695

The Marquise de Seignelay and Two of her Children

1691. Oil on canvas, 194 x 155 cm

Pierre Mignard, known in his native France as *Le Romain*, lived in Rome from 1636 (visiting Venice and other northern Italian cities in 1654–5) until summoned home by King Louis XIV in 1657. His style was largely based on Annibale Carracci, Domenichino and Poussin (pages 181, 190, 223). However, he pretended allegiance to Titian and Venetian colourism (page 158) on his return to France, mainly to oppose his rival Lebrun, whom he succeeded in 1690 as First Painter to the King and Director of the Royal Academy. Despite all his years abroad, his work looks to us unmistakably French, at least as relating to the France of the Sun King's court: calculated and grand. Hogarth's xenophobic English judgement, half a century later, might apply to this superb portrait: 'insolence with an affectation of politeness'. But Mignard was doing no more than following the wishes of his sitter, the widow of Jean-Baptiste Colbert de Seignelay, Minister for the Navy.

Catherine-Thérèse de Matignon, Marquise de Lonray, *veuve* de Seignelay, instructed Mignard to portray her as the sea-nymph Thetis, to whom was said (according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* XI, 221–3): 'O goddess of the waves, conceive: thou shalt be the mother of a youth who, when to manhood grown, shall outdo his father's deeds and shall be called greater than he.' Past writers have attributed Mme de Seignelay's transformation into a sea goddess to her husband's office, but Neil MacGregor has shown that this passage from Ovid is the key to the portrait. Like Thetis, Mlle de Matignon, of old Norman nobility, had been married off against her will to a social inferior: Colbert, her husband's father and the great Minister of the King, was the son

of a draper. The goddess's husband, Peleus, had to rape Thetis to 'beget on her the great Achilles', the most celebrated Greek hero of the Trojan War. 'The hero's mother, goddess of the sea, was ambitious for her son' and by descending into the fiery crater of Etna, the volcano seen here smoking in the background, obtained for him armour made by Vulcan, the blacksmith god. This is the armour, 'work of heavenly art', worn in the guise of Achilles by Marie-Jean-Baptiste de Seignelay, the eldest son for whom Mme de Seignelay had just bought a military commission.

The painting's brilliant effect depends in large measure on the vast expanse of Thetis' best ultramarine-blue cloak, contrasting wonderfully with the coral and pearls in her hair, and the mauves and greens of Achilles' garments. Ultramarine was the costliest of pigments, more expensive than gold itself and for that reason seldom used by this date, and never in such quantities. Thus did Mme de Seignelay confound the rumours put about by *mauvaises langues* that she was bankrupt. And there is more: other rumours circulated that the noble widow either was, or wished to be, mistress to the king. The Cupid proffering a precious nautilus shell brimming over with a king's ransom in jewels publicises the liaison as a *fait accompli*. Thus might a classical education, and the talents of a Roman-trained and responsive artist, be put to insolent use 'with an affectation of politeness'.