

Art and Incarnation:

The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600-1700

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The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600-1700 is an exhibition comprised of works in two mediums, oil on canvas paintings and polychromatic sculpture. The paintings are by prominent artists whose names will be recognizable to many, while both the sculptures and their creators will almost certainly be less familiar. This exhibition sets out to introduce them to the viewer, and to show their role in the development of Spanish art. Therefore, as the exhibition itself asserts, the juxtaposition of the two mediums stands to teach us quite a lot about how we understand not only the tradition of Spanish art, but also how we understand religious art more generally.

The stated thesis of the exhibition has two parts: the first primarily historical and the second sociological. The historical part begins in the working conditions of medieval Spain when the strict guild system in place ensured the separation of labour, including that labour which produced sacred art. Therefore, when the guild of sculptors was commissioned by the Church to create a statue—the kind of life-like polychromatic sculptures which reside in churches, and are carried through the streets during Holy Week in Spain even to this day—they were only allowed to carve and whitewash them. The task of painting was reserved for an artist trained by the guild of painters. This system thrived as the Church recognized the value of such art to inspire devotion in the people as directly connected to the realism of the figures, particularly in scenes of the passion. By the 17th century, the high demand for such polychromatic sculpture meant that Spain's young painters were gaining extensive experience in creating an exacting sculptural realism. The claim of the exhibition itself is that this experience gave rise to the explicitly sculptural kind of painting on canvas found in seventeenth century Spain. This exhibition makes this claim clearly by juxtaposing polychromatic sculpture with works of Zurbarán and Velázquez's as

well as Alonso Cano and Francisco Ribalta. We will return to this claim and the question of its success shortly.

The second, and admittedly less important claim, is that the role which polychromatic sculpture played in the development of painting was largely overlooked because the significant surviving pieces have not been housed in museums but in churches—where they are still very much an active part of the worship and procession. Re-conceiving the period which became the Golden Age in light of these sculptures allows us to see a specifically Spanish element in the development of realist painting, thus offering a contrast to the frequent comparisons with Caravaggio and the more idealized Italian tradition. I would go on to add that apart from merely nationalistic concerns, this fact does allow us to recognize contemplative and devotional aspects in the Spanish paintings that are suggestively different than their idealized Italian and cerebral Dutch contemporaries.

To illustrate this, consider the first piece of sculpture displayed in the exhibition, Juan de Mesa's *Christ on the Cross* (1618-1620)—probably the model for his much larger contemporary piece of the same name (not in this exhibition). At a height of one hundred centimetres, this crucifix is the only piece of sculpture in the exhibition which could not be considered 'life-size' in its dimensions. For this reason, it is also the sculpture which evokes the most aesthetic, and therefore the least immediately human reaction. All of the excellent detail of musculature and matted hair only bring the viewer to reflect upon how much the sculpture looks like a person. The human form in these proportions keeps us at a distance, a distance at which we can view it at once, as a work of art or even as an artifact. Only the sharp distended profile of shadow which de Mesa's piece casts upon the wall can approach the effect of nearly all of the life-sized pieces. And that effect is striking. Indeed it is one of the ends towards which these sculptures were made: their uncanny ability to appear human to us, even to evoke empathy in us.

To be sure, it is not that the life-size pieces fool us into thinking they are real; they don't. Yet they demand that we don't treat them like just any other piece of art, and certainly they cannot be treated like the bits of wood that they are. In other words, our knowledge of the sculptures as mere wooden objects stands in tension with the way that their presented form strikes us. That same tension—between our knowledge of some object as inanimate and our uncanny feeling in its presence—is seen in Ovid's explanation for Pygmalion falling in love with his creation, that 'his art concealed his art', and in Donatello's curse of 'Speak, speak, damn you, speak!' to a statue he was struggling to complete, and even in Tom Hanks' character painting a face on a volleyball in order to befriend it in the film *Castaway*. In each of these cases the creator of the piece has no delusions about the material substance of his work, yet each brings forth, or strives to bring forth from that material substance some human quality which cannot be denied.

Thus, as this exhibition displays these tensions in sculptures of Christ and the Saints, the title, *The Sacred Made Real*, is a fitting one. Yet there is something of a puzzle about this notion of 'made real'. Certainly 'real' in the title cannot mean the opposite of 'unreal'. For, unless we are prepared to project our twenty-first century scepticism into the seventeenth century, we must acknowledge that in the eyes of the sculptors the subjects of their religious art were in some sense very real before being sculpted. How then are we to understand the 'real' in *The Sacred Made Real*? Well, if we understand the title as an allusion to Christ—himself the sacred made real—then we can see that it implies a parallel between the work of the painters and sculptors whose work is presented in the exhibition and the incarnation. Keeping in mind that it is a point of Christian theology that Christ existed eternally before the incarnation, then we can understand the act of making real as a kind of 'bringing near' or 'making accessible'. And this is exactly what the sculptures have done so very well.

This is seen most clearly in the pieces about the Passion. Gregorio Fernández's *Ecce Homo* shows Christ having just been mocked and scourged. Christ is portrayed with mouth open, eyes of glass partially rolled back, hands bound in

front, and nude save a loin cloth (Fig. 1). The scourge lacerations are fresh; the blood trickles down, not yet clotting. The wounds themselves have shape, smooth and ragged ends, and there are even portions of skin torn away. This figure creates such a sense of vulnerability that one feels drawn to cover it. In the sculpture vulnerability is brought near. If Fernández's *Ecce Homo* is the embodiment of vulnerability then his *Dead Christ* (1625-30) brings near death



Fig. 1: Gregorio Fernández and an unknown polychromer, *Ecce Homo*, before 1621, polychromed wood, glass and cloth, 182 x 55 x 38 cm. Museo Diocesano y Catedralicio, Valladolid. Image courtesy National Gallery, London.

and loss of hope (Fig. 2). This sculpture represents Christ laid out on a bier. His head is sunken to one side with his mouth agape, and his legs awkwardly turned to the side. His skin is pallid, almost blue, and his wounds are open; Fernández has used painted cork tree bark to show the blood congealing. Christ is presented alone; by omitting the mother Fernández's sculpture has none of the sorrow and loss which mark the *pietà*. There is no living figure represented here; it is only death with the loss of hope and possibility which accompany it. The impression given is similar to Prince Mishkin's response to Holbein's painting *The Body of Dead Christ in a Tomb* (1520-2) in Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*. He says, "a painting like that could have a crushing effect on any man's faith'. Clearly, in both of Fernández's figures aspects of the passion narrative are made real for the viewer. Elements of the passion narrative, which might otherwise pass by in adjective form, are brought near and made undeniable by the presence of these sculptures. Yet if we recognize between the incarnation and the polychromatic sculpture an analogy of 'making real', then how are we to understand the seventeenth century painting which



Fig. 2: Gregorio Fernández and an unknown polychromer, *Dead Christ*, c. 1625-30, polychromed wood, horn glass, bark, and ivory or bone, 46 x 191 x 74 cm. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid. Image courtesy National Gallery, London.

the exhibition claims was influenced by that sculptural tradition? The sculptures bring within our grasp that which might otherwise be too abstract or too ethereal, and as a result, slip away. Their ability to do this successfully accounts for their popularity in religious processions to this day. Paintings, on the other hand, accomplish something different; something which cannot be displayed by marching them through the street. Paintings are able to show us possibility. In other words, they are able to bring into consideration that which cannot be made present. To be clear, this is not merely to say that paintings can show us fantastic things like unicorns or even invisible things like electrons. Rather it is to say that paintings can show us something from a perspective which is not now our own. In other words, most paintings do not thrust themselves into our space, and thereby into our own perspective; instead they give us a window onto a space which we don't currently occupy. The result is a kind of temporal dynamism of interaction in viewing a painting that is not present in the



Fig. 3: Diego Velázquez, *Christ after the Flagellation contemplated by the Christian Soul*, 1628-9, oil on canvas, 165 x 206.4 cm. Image courtesy of the National Gallery, London.

sculptures. For example, if Fernández's *Ecce Homo* forces us to think about what it would be to behold the historical event of a scourging, then Velázquez's *Christ after the Flagellation contemplated by the Christian Soul* (1628-9) —a painting which shows an angel leading a small child to inspect the wounds of Christ after the flagellation— causes us to meditate on those same events without being transported historically (Fig. 3). This dynamic effect is dramatic in the paintings and serves to highlight the sculptural qualities related to the theme of the exhibition.

The centrepiece of the exhibition— directly visible as you enter the National Gallery exhibition in London —is Zurbarán's *Christ on the Cross* (1627) (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ on the Cross*, 1627, oil on canvas, 290.3 x 165.5 cm. The Art Institute of Chicago. Image courtesy of the National Gallery, London.

It is a life-size painting of the crucifixion, and it represents the strongest version of the central thesis of the exhibition. The image simply refuses to stay flat. The cross beam runs behind the upright beam, thus the arms appear to be pinned back while Christ's torso appears to be pushed forward, while his head slumps more forward still. The nail heads in the hands and feet are shown as circles with no profile, as if seen from directly in front. In actual space, this is of course highly unlikely given the height difference between the nails in the hands and the feet, but the effect is that there is no point from which the image does not seem to project forward toward the viewer. The sharp lines and angles of folds and shading of the loincloth provide a clear contrast with the rounded soft shadows of Christ's gaunt musculature.

Zurbarán's own signature is asserted by a ragged piece of paper pinned to the bottom of the cross before it disappears into shadow at the bottom of the painting. Painted for a chapel altar in the Dominican priory of San Pedro in Seville, the chiaroscuro image was lit by two high windows on the right, which Zurbarán imitated in the painting. Originally the painting would have been displayed in an arched alcove which would have rounded off the painting close to the top of the cross. The squareness of the frame thus hidden from the viewer, and with no portion of the figure reaching to the edge of the canvas, Christ would have appeared to have been suspended there in the shadows. Appearing sculptural at first, the painting calls the viewer to the spectacle of crucifixion with all the shame of this public but isolated form of execution. Like the polychromatic sculpture in the exhibition, the first impact is to move the viewer to react with empathy, or perhaps even disgust in turn. Yet when the painting reveals itself to be flat, as all flat things must, the viewer is also moved out of her own immediate perspective. The event depicted returns to proper historical distance and the empathy subsides. For this historical distance is unbridgeable by our own action. For example, we could imagine a particularly pious person finding comfort in the act of wrapping a cloak around one of the statues of Christ, for then his nakedness is clothed. On the other hand, if the viewer acknowledges that Zurbarán's Christ is actually a painting of the crucifixion, then no relief can be found in covering the figure, for to do so would

only be to alter the image and not the subject of the painting. Thus the viewer is left to contemplate her own relation to the subject, without the denial of temporal distance demanded by the presence of the sculpture. Zurbarán's Christ on the Cross brings out a backward-looking sense of temporality—one that stretches from the subject through the church in which it was displayed, through the tradition of the painter, preserved through to its place before the viewer. But this is not the only temporal structure; as we shall see, other paintings can also thrust the viewer forward.

The final room of The National Gallery exhibition in London displays only a single painting (Fig. 5). Entering the long dark narrow room, a single light illuminates Zurbarán's *Saint Serapion* (1628) on the far wall. Even in approaching the painting down the long room provides several moments of study. After John the Baptist and Jesus, Saint Serapion is the only figure of the exhibition depicted in death. The painting shows the martyrdom of the saint,



Fig. 5: Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Serapion*, 1628, oil on canvas, 120.2 x 104 cm. Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, Hartford Connecticut, The Ella Gallup Sumner and Mary Catlin Sumner Collection Fund. Image courtesy of the National Gallery, London.

which seems to have only just occurred. Yet in stark contrast to the exhibition's many depictions of Christ, there is no sign of blood. Saint Serapion's heavy white habit appears to be newly clean and full. It falls down in elaborate folds from his limp figure. The robes are held away from his body by his arms outstretched in crucifixion, so that his slight frame is only just perceptible under their bulk. His cowl has fallen back off his head, enveloping his neck entirely. Only the position of his head, awkwardly slumped to the right and completely supported by his shoulder, bears witness to his gruesome martyrdom. Tradition has it that the English-born saint was partially beheaded. Unlike the rest of the exhibition the room is otherwise empty; this painting has no sculptural pairing, no immediate model for its inspiration. In this room the direction of the exhibition is reversed, we stand as the three-dimensional forms informed by the painted canvas.

Xavier Bray with Alfonso Rodríguez G. de Ceballos, Daphne Barbour and Judy Ozone, with contributions by Maria Fernanda Morón de Castro, Marjorie Trusted, Elonora Luciano, Rocio Izquierdo Moreno, Ignacio Hermoso Romero and Maria del Valme Muñoz Rubio; *The Sacred Made Real, Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600-1700* (London: National Gallery Publication 2009), 208pp., 180 ill in col. £35 hardcover, £20 paperback. ISBN: 978-1-85709-422-0

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