

Religious Art in Spain and Italy

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I. Zurbarán and the Sevillian Context

In 1503, Charles V gave Seville the monopoly of trade with the New World. The city became quite prosperous and attracted numerous foreign artists including the Flemish painter Kempeneer* (1503-1580) (Room 9). Italian artists brought a late Mannerist style that would find an important echo at the end of the sixteenth century in the work of Francisco Pacheco (1564-1654) and Juan de Roelas (1558/60-1625). Between 1600 and 1640, over thirty new convents were built. Sevillian painting that was rooted in local tradition steeped in popular medieval culture moved away in part from the sophisticated intellectualism of Italianate Mannerism. It was to develop progressively into a naturalistic, sentimental style open to tenebrist experimentations inspired by the oeuvre of Caravaggio (1571-1610) whose paintings could be seen in Seville from 1603 onwards.

Zurbarán (1598-1664) was born in Extremadura, but would train in Seville where he settled in 1629. In the ten years between 1630 and 1640 (when he painted the two works in the Musée Fabre), he was to enjoy growing fame. Unlike Velasquez (1599-1660) and Ribera (1591-1652) he did not travel in Italy and therefore remained deeply immersed in the cultural context of Seville and depended almost exclusively on the local clergy and its tastes for his commissions.

These two works by Zurbarán are not independent paintings, but were part of two different retables. In Spain, retables are large wooden constructions that occupy virtually all of a chapel wall and are highly structured by an architectural décor sometimes filled with statues in the manner of medieval polyptychs. The overall effect, gilded and painted, brings to mind a church façade. Zurbarán, who had trained as a sculptor, helped to create these complex works for which he sometimes had to paint over twenty pictures. The canvasses, separated by the décor, were set as matching pieces on several levels framing a central scene – in this way, the Saint Andrew in the Budapest museum (fig.1) was the pendant to the *Angel Gabriel**. The holy figures standing out against the dark ground attract one's gaze. The believer may put aside the sparkling décor to focus on the edifying examples offered for him to meditate upon.

In 1810, when the French army occupied Seville, many retables were seized and dismantled. This is when Marshal Soult carried off the two works now in the Musée Fabre. They were purchased by the city of Montpellier during the 1852 sale of his collection.



fig.1- Zurbarán
Saint Andrew
Budapest, Museum of Fine Arts
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II. Italy

Around 1600, the artistic reform advocated by Annibale Carracci (1560-1609), was a means of reviving the clear, classical aesthetic of the Renaissance. At the same time, the at times dramatic realism established by Caravaggio and his followers was a way of reviving the emotional and militant spirituality of the Counter-Reformation.

Devotional Paintings

Alongside the production of large retables for didactic ends, the workshops also supplied a large number of small format works for private use. Certain well-known artists would devote themselves almost exclusively to this type of work.

Carlo Dolci (1616-1686) was known to be intensely devout. For him, as for Fra Angelico (1387-1455), painting was prayer. He was indifferent to the Baroque style introduced in

Room
Zurbarán

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Florence by Pietro da Cortona (1596-1669) who decorated the planet rooms at the Pitti Palace for Grand Duke Ferdinand II, but remained loyal to the classical aesthetic of the Madonnas of Raphael (1483-1520). The oval format of the *Virgin with Lily** is reminiscent of the rounded forms of the Master's tondi and reinforces the intimate, sentimental bonds uniting Mary and her son. The reference to the Virgin's purity through the white lily and to Christ's Passion in the device of the red flowers is almost a return to the symbolism of medieval paintings. *The Christ, Saviour of the World** was also to become a kind of icon. Through the great virtuosity of his workmanship and the occasionally daring harmony of colours, Dolci avoided being overly smooth and enjoyed great success in a Florence that was steeped in piety under the influence of Grand Duchess Vittoria della Rovere.

*The Landscape with the Sermon on the Mount** (c.1640) by Giovanni Francesco Grimaldi (1606-1680) is characteristic of the importance of landscape in religious paintings following the oeuvre of Annibale Carracci ; indeed, Fabre thought that he had purchased a painting by Domenichino. The religious import of the scene is subordinate to the vast landscape revisited and it is possible that the figures are not of Grimaldi's hand.

After 1620 certain painters gradually distanced themselves from Bolognese classicism and the severe iconography of the Council of Trent. The taste for tenebrism and a more anecdotal approach to biblical episodes is well illustrated in the *Holy Family** by Francesco Mola (1612-1666). This sketch – a study for the painting at the Musée Granet in Aix-en-Provence – is treated as an intimist and particularly sentimental scene : Mary is washing her son's swaddling clothes and Joseph hangs them out on a tree while Jesus like a radiant host stretches his arms towards a luminous glory of cherubs. Guercino is famous as much for his great retables as for his devotional paintings. Both are present in the Musée Fabre collection cf. the *Saint John the Baptist** (Room 11). In his *Saint Francis in Meditation**, the concentration of the saint absorbed in deep meditation on the Passion of Christ is reminiscent of the spiritual exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola, while the details of the patched cowl solicit the faithful to follow the path of poverty advocated by the Saint of Assisi.

A Prestigious Model : Religion Overthrowing Heresy*

When the French sculptor Pierre Legros the Younger (1666-1719) arrived in Rome in 1695, the decoration of the funerary chapel of Saint Ignatius of Loyola was on the agenda. Set in the right transept of the Gesu Church in Rome, this grandiose monument designed by Padre Pozzo (1642-1709), famous for his perspectives, takes the form of a manifesto of the victory of the Catholic Church over Protestantism. Legros's offering was this terracotta piece for the group in white marble that was to decorate the right-hand side of the altar. The *Triumph of Faith over Idolatry* by Jean-Baptiste Théodon (1646-1713) formed its pendant on the left-hand side. The final marble group is very close to this study in which the vigour of the imperial gesture of Religion, the expressiveness of emaciated Heresy tearing her hair out and the typically Baroque instability of the male figure who falls out of the architectural frame in a daring pose are already apparent (fig.2). Legros also created the silver statue of saint Ignatius surmounting the altar and participated in the production of the lavish balustrade.



fig.2- Pierre Legros the Younger
Religion Overthrowing Heresy
Rome, altarpiece of saint Ignatius,
Gesu Church
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The overall polychromy of the final monument, in its mixture of multicoloured marble, semiprecious stones and bronzes with a green or golden sheen, is fully in keeping with the spirit of great Roman Baroque art : in a synthetic vision closely related to the great declamatory scenes of the then nascent opera, painting, architecture and sculpture merge together to create a complete work of art liable to captivate, move and impress believers.