

ART REVIEW

# Unearthing a Trove of Spanish Artwork

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LONDON — Call it the Spanish enigma. At distant intervals, breathtaking masterpieces of world importance spring up on the art scene out of a morass of tame and often derivative works.

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Trustees of the British Museum  
Alonso Berruguete's "Assumption of the Virgin," 1555-61.

Never was the point made so forcefully, albeit not intentionally, as in the British Museum show "Renaissance to Goya: Prints and Drawings From Spain," put together in order to display most of the institution's rarely seen collection.

In the introduction to his pioneering book that comes with the exhibition, Mark P. McDonald, the leading specialist in Spanish drawings and prints from the 15th to the 19th century, draws attention to a common misconception: "In accounts of art in Spain during the Renaissance and early modern period it has often been suggested that Spanish artists did not draw and that print production was insignificant." This, Mr. McDonald goes on, is due to the scarcity of Spanish drawings.

One reason for the scarcity is simply that many remain unidentified and "languish in boxes marked anonymous" because of the lack of financial stimulus. The curator points out that as early as the 15th century drawings in Spain were considered to be of little value. Yet period sources prove that some Spanish artists were busily drawing early on.

The will of a painter from Valencia, Bartomeu Salset, whose oeuvre is otherwise unknown, mentions "many papers with drawn images." Ten years later, the 1428 inventory of the estate of another Valencia artist, Joan Vicent, describes a chest of drawings "and other large sheets."

Discoveries are bound to be made in coming years, prompted among other things by Mr. McDonald's book that collectors may find even more gripping than the exhibition.

Early Renaissance drawings from Spain that were

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Trustees of the British Museum  
"Head of a Monk," 1625-64, by Francisco de Zurbarán.

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"The Sleep of Reason," 1797-98, by Francisco de Goya.

previously unknown and others familiar only to specialists are illustrated for the first time.

A fascinating study for the image of Mary is preserved in the Valencia Cathedral. This is a pure masterpiece. Still influenced by Byzantine iconography, the staring face with big eyes has a startling immediacy.

A portrait of Prince Carlos Viana, which is likewise anonymous, reveals that engraving in Spain could rise to the highest level by the 1460s.

Drawings from the 16th century survive in larger numbers. Most are identifiable as Spanish and can be traced back to their authors because they are preparatory studies for documented paintings.

Alonso Berruguete's "Assumption of the Virgin" leaps off the wall. Drawn around 1555-61, a woman in drapes, hands clasped, seems to be twirling in ecstasy. The mark left on Berruguete's sketch by the time that he spent in Italy is evident, but so too is the originality of a vigorous artistic temperament.

Italian influence was then pervasive as elsewhere in Europe.

Pedro Machuca from Toledo spent time in Italy before settling in Granada. Only one drawing can be securely recognized as his work. The "Descent from the Cross" is a fully finished sketch in pen and brown ink heightened with white. The sculptural feeling and the superlative quality of the execution reveal a self-assured master. Preserved in the Louvre, the sketch unfortunately falls outside the scope of the British Museum exhibition, limited to the institution's belongings obviously for financial reasons. Tracings of squaring indicate that the sketch was used by Machuca when painting the 1547 panel to be seen in the Prado.

Too few sketches, safely identifiable and datable, survive to plot the history of Spanish drawings from the time of Berruguete to that of Francisco de Zurbarán. Very little, if anything, heralded the appearance of the latter. It is not even entirely sure, although highly likely, that the unforgettable head of a monk in black chalk and grey wash is by Zurbarán. Done between the mid-1630s and the mid-1650s, this too is a fully finished work — whether or not it later served as a preparatory study by the master from Seville. Like Machuca's "Descent from the Cross," the "Head of a Monk" gives the impression of simulating a bas relief.

By the mid-17th century, this powerful sculptural trend was entrenched in Spain. The study of a seated male in the nude done in pen and brown ink is non-committally given by Mr. McDonald to the "Circle of Fernando de Herrera." A Spanish inscription says "sketch from life," possibly indicating that it was done by an academy student. If so, the student was exceptionally brilliant.

The sculptural strain appears to have been running through the oeuvre of another Seville master as famous in his time as Zurbarán. Juan Simón Gutiérrez is believed to have sketched "The Archangel Michael" as a preliminary study for a painting that has not

come down to us. The memory of the lost Gutiérrez however survives in a copy made by an anonymous fellow artist, now in a Bolivian private collection. The draftsman's pen strokes convey a sense of movement in the archangel while still managing to suggest a sculptural volume. It reminds one of Guercino's brown ink studies, minus the Caravaggesque artist's vigor.

Fast forward to the 18th century. Like Zurbarán in the 17th century, Francisco de Goya rises so high above the other artists of his time wielding the pen or etching copper plates that they look laughable by comparison. The master stands as much apart in the multiple styles that he cultivated as he does in his mood, alternatively full of jarring sarcasm or exploding in fury at the savagery of his contemporaries.

What makes Goya's case even more extraordinary is that he should have thrived under the shadow of such a conventional artist as Francisco Bayeu y Subias.

By the 1770s when Goya drew the first sketches that have come down to us, Spain was simultaneously undergoing the influence of France and Italy.

A study of two men in court attire done in red chalk by Bayeu y Subias could be mistaken for the work of Lancret or Patel while the head of a young woman smiling, eyes cast down could be by any number of French artists working at the court of Louis XV. On the other hand, a Venetian whiff emanates from "The Masked Ball in the Teatro del Principe," now in the Prado.

How Goya could conceive his sneering portraits and his scenes full of rage in the bland artistic milieu of mid- to late 18th-century Spain cultivating the mannered artifice imported from France is profoundly intriguing.

An early etching was done by Goya after his own cartoon "The Blind Guitarist" for a tapestry due to be woven in the royal factory. It is filled with characters with grins that are more sinister than cheerful. The irony is that the factory was run by the genteel Bayeu y Subias. A few years earlier, as he entered a competition at the Fine Arts Academy in Parma, Goya had professed to be "a disciple" of the said Bayeu y Subias. Fortunately neither Goya's "master" Bayeu y Subias, nor Italy left much of an imprint on his art.

Very quickly, Goya's drawings and etchings challenged the accepted ideas of his contemporaries. "The Garroted Man," an etching done around 1778 is a scathing critique of the ferocious executions of his time. It is made the more virulent by sending back a layman's echo to the theme of Jesus on the Cross.

Two decades later, Goya drew and etched "The Sleep of Reason" as a visual diatribe against the abdication of rationality to inept superstitions. The surrealist composition heralds the work of Füssli, the anglicized Swiss artist.

To the end, Goya went on feverishly lambasting the savagery of society in peace as in wartime. "If He Is Guilty, Let Him Die Quickly" is as violent in its rendition of a broken man chained and fettered in prison, as his famous series of the "Horrors of War."

Little wonder that the revolutionary artist eventually had to flee in exile. He died in 1828 in Bordeaux, in southwest France, a redoubt of conservatism where he must have stood out as an oddball as he did throughout his life.

**Renaissance to Goya: Prints and Drawings From Spain.** British Museum, London. *Through Jan. 6*