

El Greco to Goya review – tears, shackles and anguish in dark dramas from Spain

Wallace Collection, London

Ecstasy and self-loathing abound in this show of masterpieces and an exquisite selection of other paintings from the ‘best place to see Spanish art in Britain’



Pain of the betrayer ... The Tears of St Peter by El Greco, Domenikos Theotokopoulos, in El Greco to Goya – Spanish Masterpieces from The Bowes Museum at the Wallace Collection. Photograph: The Bowes Museum





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‘**T**he best place to see Spanish art in the UK,” says Xavier Bray, director of the Wallace Collection in London, “is the Bowes Museum.” This remarkable institution in Barnard Castle, County Durham, exists because of the philanthropic instincts of its founders, John and Joséphine Bowes. He was British, the illegitimate son of the third Earl of Strathmore; she was a Frenchwoman who had acted on the Paris stage. Neither lived to see the Bowes open 125 years ago, but they bequeathed some remarkable pictures to the people of north-east England.

In 1862, their art adviser Benjamin Gogué wrote to them about El Greco and Goya, saying: “I have sold several pictures by these two masters. Although these two don’t appeal to you as artists, I think you might well take one of each for your collection.” They did, and the result is that Barnard Castle has what Bray, former curator of Spanish art at the National Gallery in London, calls “easily the greatest Goya portrait in the country”, a penetratingly intimate image of the painter’s friend, the poet, lawyer and prison reformer Juan Antonio Meléndez Valdés. It also has one of the best works made by El Greco, *The Tears of St Peter*. This subject, showing the saint in an agony of self-loathing after betraying Christ, was one that the Cretan artist returned to several times; there are at least six versions. This, however, is “the prime original”, says Bray.

Now, for the first time, these masterpieces, alongside a small but exquisite selection of Spanish paintings also drawn from the Bowes, can be seen (free) at the Wallace Collection, where they have been liberated from the somewhat congested “salon hang” of their regular home, and allowed to star in their own small-scale drama. The show’s faintly ecclesiastical atmosphere, with its dark, moody walls and dramatic lighting, is a reminder that most of these pictures were originally made for religious contexts, and that their acquisition by the Boweses was indirectly due to the confiscation of property in 1836 from the Spanish church by the liberal government of Juan Álvarez Mendizábal.



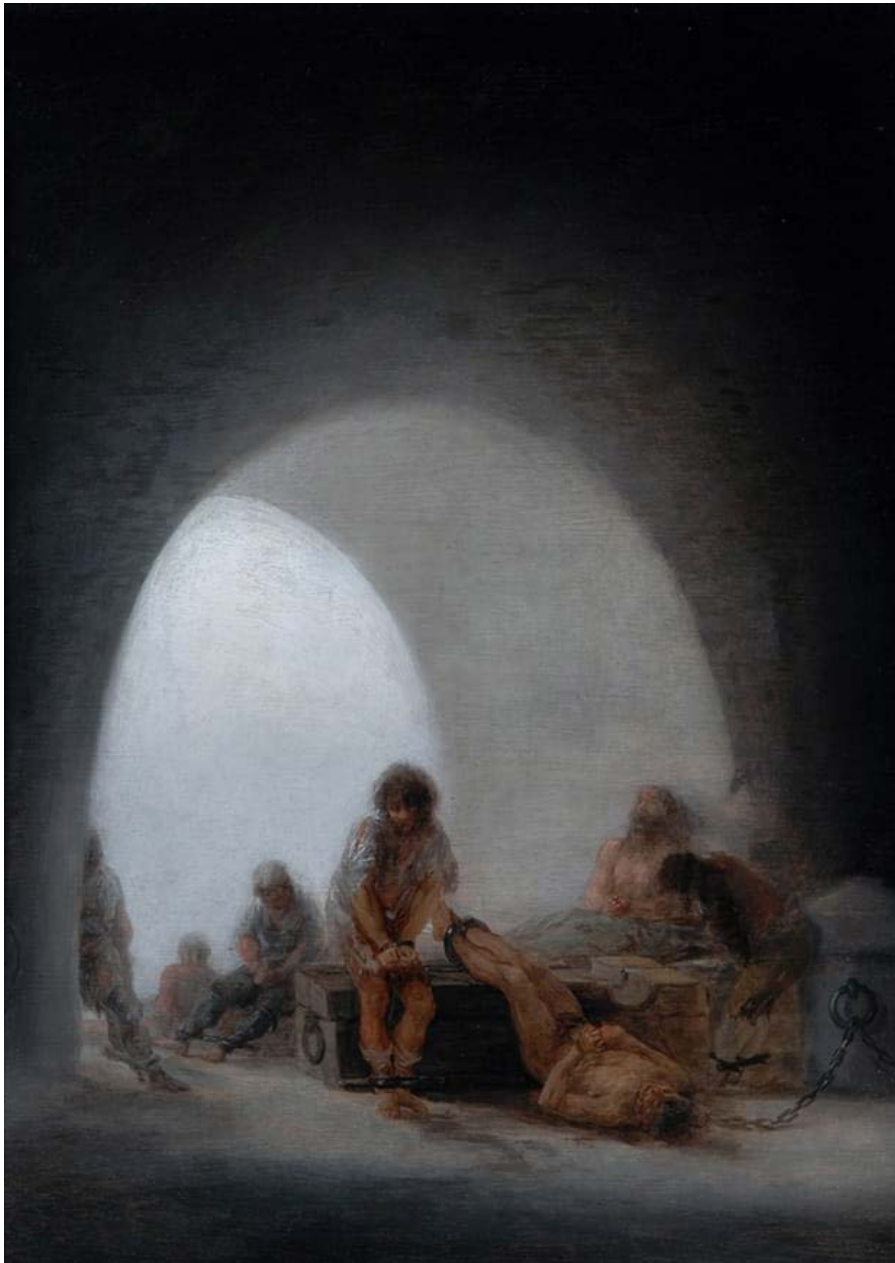
Immediacy ... Mariana of Austria, Queen of Spain, 1683-93, by Claudio Coello at the Wallace Collection. Photograph: The Bowes Museum

Much of the seized art flowed into museums; some of it, like the works the Boweses acquired from the widow of a Spanish aristocrat, wound up in private hands. This suppression of the monasteries, as Bray points out, is one of the moments in history when works such as *The Immaculate Conception* by José Antolínez (1635-1675), a highlight of the Wallace exhibition, stop being objects of religious veneration and start being art – objects of primarily aesthetic, rather than devotional or ritual value.

If this intimate exhibition is an ensemble drama, it has a star: the El Greco. This is not the lofty Peter who sits at the right hand of God, jangling the keys to heaven, but a man who knows he has done something utterly, unspeakably terrible. A moody composition in deep blues and mustards, in which the saint's tear-swollen eyes cast upwards towards a stormy sky, it is, says Bray, “almost abstract expressionist” in its force and abandonment of realism.

Hanging opposite it, and in complete contrast, is the Goya: the lawyer-poet is depicted with his mouth slightly open as if about to speak, a flush of pinkish veins on his cheeks. Beside it, there's another Goya masterpiece, of a very different order. Painted a few years earlier, it shows a scene in a prison. Ghostly figures slump over their chains, or lean haggard and half naked against walls. It's part of a series of 12 works that confront us with the ugly truths of human nature. Other subjects include a madhouse, a bullfight, a fire in a theatre, and bandits shooting travellers.

Despite the element of reportage, though, the work has an intriguing relationship to realism. The light source is a blindingly white archway at the back of the scene that appears to have nothing to do with the architecture of an actual prison. It's reminiscent of the strange light-flooded window in another Goya that hangs in Valencia Cathedral, in which St Francis Borgia prays at the deathbed of an impenitent sinner who is about to be consumed by an array of ravening, grotesque beasts from hell. For Goya, these little pieces on tinsplate were the beginning of a stream of work that would lead to his dark, satirical and fantastical *Caprichos* prints – and, ultimately, to the great desolation of the *Black Paintings* of his later life.



Interior of a Prison, 1793-94, by Goya. Photograph: The Bowes Museum

One of the pleasures of the exhibition is the work by less well-known Spanish artists. Aside from the sensuous *Immaculate Conception* by Antolínez, with its Virgin reminiscent of a Venus rising from the waves, there is an intriguing full-length painting of St Eustochium by Juan de Valdés Leal (1622-1690), which once hung in a Hieronymite monastery in Seville. St Eustochium, daughter of a Roman senator, was a learned figure of the fourth century who read Latin, Greek and Hebrew, and assisted St

Jerome in his translation of the Bible into Latin. St Jerome himself – a favourite subject for religious painters, with his friendly lion and his hermit's cave – is here for once relegated to a little scene in the background and St Eustochium (scholar, housekeeper and nun) made the star. There's also Antonio de Pereda's Tobias Restoring His Father's Sight, illustrating an episode from the apocryphal Book of Tobit. Tobias, according to the instructions of the angel in the foreground looking directly at us, beckoning us into the picture, is treating his father's blinded eyes with the gall of the fish that lies on the ground, gutted. It's a particularly splendid fish, since De Pereda, barely known in this country, was a particularly splendid painter of still lifes.



● Still life with Asparagus, Artichokes, Lemons and Cherries, 1602-14 by Blas de Ledesma.
Photograph: The Bowes Museum

If there is a common thread among these works, so fortuitously amassed by the Boweses, it is their immediacy: even the artichokes, lemons and grapes in the two still lifes glow from their dark backgrounds with an almost terrifying intensity. St Francis levitates into a moody sky, his bloodshot eyes full of his ecstatic devotion to his God. Queen Mariana – that same queen, now much older, whose reflection glows in the mirror in Velázquez's *Las Meninas* – gazes glumly out of Claudio Coello's portrait from the 1680s-90s. St Andrew, in a work by El Greco's pupil Luis Tristán de Escamilla (c1585-1624), goes to his death on an X-shaped cross amid a shadowy landscape, his flesh whitened as if by a flashbulb, for God has sent a blinding light to illuminate his last moments.

In their anguish and ecstasy, these are works that reel you in and implicate you in their dark, ferocious dramas.