

EVERETT POTTER'S TRAVEL REPORT

The Frick Collection's Stunning Zurbarans

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By Bobbie Leigh



Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664)
Benjamin, c. 1640–45
Oil on canvas. © Grimsthorpe and Drummond Castle Trust
Photo credit: Robert LaPrelle

The Frick's must-see exhibition, *Zurbaran's Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle* is not to be missed. The monumental paintings are based on the Hebrew Bible, Genesis 49:1-27 where Jacob, son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, gives his 12 sons deathbed blessings and predictions. The sons came to be known as the Patriarchs, leaders of the 12 Lost Tribes of Israel.

The Lost Tribes play a significant role in the back story of the Auckland Castle paintings. Why did Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664), who usually chose saints and sinners, monks and monasteries for his subjects, zero in on this Old Testament passage? One answer is that in 17th century Spain it was widely believed that the indigenous people in New Spain were descendants of the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel. Consequently, it made economic sense for Zurbaran to turn to this popular subject and paint for the export market.

The 1640's were a challenging time for the painter. After considerable success early in his career, even being named "Honorary Painter to King Philip's court, the Spanish master fell on hard times. Ecclesiastic commissions lapsed and patrons disappeared. To recover, Zurbaran turned to the New World. To make ends meet, records show Zurbaran made several sets of Jacob and his sons for the Roman Catholic market in South America. Perhaps that was the original destination for the Auckland series. Colonial patrons and churches apparently were a good market for this subject as Spanish missionaries actively advanced the Lost Tribes hypothesis.

For the record: The Ten Lost Tribes disappeared from history after the northern kingdom of Israel was overrun by the Assyrians in 721 BCE. Only the tribes of Judah and Benjamin remained in Israel. According to the New Testament, all of the Apostles except Judas are said to be descended from the tribe of Benjamin. Scholars also point to several places in the Hebrew Bible where the story of Jacob and his sons foreshadows the New Testament. "Contemporary viewers would have understood the paintings in allegorical terms, as the Blessing of Jacob reveals God's plan for the salvation of the world through the death and resurrection of his son, Jesus Christ," writes Edward Payne in the exhibition's richly absorbing catalog.



Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664)
Jacob, ca. 1640–45
Oil on canvas.
© The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust
Photo credit: Robert LaPrelle

Auckland Castle's life-size paintings of Jacob and his sons are iconic. They depict a variety of social distinctions, ages, and costumes. Grounded in landscape settings at their feet and sumptuous clouds above their heads, the Patriarch's portraits are narratives. "Gather around, that I may tell you what will happen to you in the days to come," says Jacob according to Genesis. Zurbarán indicates Jacob's status by a gold-brocade turban and his great age by a long-flowing white beard. He leans heavily on his staff, lost in thought.



Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664)
 Reuben, ca. 1640–45
 Oil on canvas
 © The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust
 Photo credit: Robert LaPrelle

Reuben, whom Jacob calls “unstable as water,” looks somber and disturbed. He betrayed his father’s trust by sleeping with Jacob’s concubine. Like Jacob, his eyes are veiled and he leans on a column almost as tall as he is. Simeon’s clothes are ragged. A blood-red sash surrounds his waist. Simeon stands in a rocky landscape and looks like the criminal he is. Along with his brother Levi, he killed the men of Shalem to avenge the rape of his sister Dinah. Zurbarán is a master at evoking somber moods and realistic features. Dubbed “the Spanish Caravaggio” because of his mastery of light-dark contrasts, Zurbarán’s is also a skilled still-life painter. Asher, the farmer, carries a remarkably realistic overflowing basket of rolls referring to the Jacob prediction: “Asher’s food shall be rich, and he shall provide royal delicacies.” Joseph is the most elegant of the brothers. He looks confident, rich, and powerful. Zurbarán portrays him as a high-ranking Egyptian official wearing an elaborate turban and fur cloak. The painter’s father was a haberdasher which explains his skill with texture and fabric.



Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664)
 Asher, ca. 1640–45
 Oil on canvas
 © The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust
 Photo credit: Robert LaPrelle

You don't need a Sunday School education to "read" these paintings as the Frick's labels are informative. Whether wearing a heavily brocaded robe, fur cape and crown like Judah or shabbily dressed like Issachar, the most humble of all the brothers, each painting is a marvel of heavy brush-stroke painting and story-telling. Nothing is left out.

Zubaran painted the monumental Auckland Castle series between 1640 -1645. No records have thus far surfaced to document who commissioned the paintings or why they resurfaced in London in the 1720s. We do know that in 1756 they were bought by James Mendez, a Portuguese Jewish merchant in Surrey who owned them until his death in 1756 when they were snapped up in a posthumous auction. The buyer was Richard Trevor, Bishop of Durham, who was able to secure 12 of the paintings but missed out on Benjamin, the youngest son. To complete the set, Trevor commissioned a copy by an English artist. The original Benjamin, loaned by its owner, rejoins his brothers at the Frick, in an ornate Rococo frame, unlike the simple ones for the rest of the family.

Bishop Trevor was a remarkable man for his times and ours. In 1749 he was active in getting the so-called “Jewish Bill” passed that would allow Jewish immigrants to be naturalized. The bill was passed but alas repealed in 1753. Bishop Trevor displayed his paintings in the dining room of Auckland Castle, the official residence of the bishops of Durham, in northeast England. According to a catalogue essay by Dr. Christopher Ferguson, a curator at Auckland Castle the series was “brought to Auckland Castle as a plea for religious tolerance and social equality.”



Zurbarán and other works on display in the Long Dining Room at Auckland Castle
© The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust
Photo credit: photo Colin Davison

To give Jacob and his sons “breathing room,” Trevor lengthened the castle’s Long Dining Room, redesigning every aspect from windows to doors so that the room was perfectly proportioned for the series. Dr. Robert McManners, a Durham native, active in preserving the region’s heritage, stresses the significance of the paintings today in his new book, “Zurbarans at Auckland Castle.” Above all, he says: “Bishop Trevor was determined to impress upon us his vision for social, religious, racial and political tolerance...”

This is the first time that the complete set of 13 paintings has been seen in this country, first in Dallas at the Meadows Museum and now in New York City. Auckland Castle, a palatial bishop’s residence and their ancestral home, is now under the auspices of the Auckland Project, established by philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer, Chair of the Auckland Castle Trust. He bought the Zurbarans and the castle and opened it to the public in 2012. Ruffer is now working to create an arts, faith, and heritage destination to revitalize northeast England. In the exhibition’s catalogue, Ruffer writes: “The story of the Zurbaran’s arrival is an important event in the legacy of Judaism in Europe, and Auckland Castle has a history of serving as a beacon of support for the Jewish community...” Visitors to the Frick will quickly recognize that the exhibition of these Spanish masterpieces adds up to much more than the sum of its parts.

On view at The Frick Collection (1 East 70th Street, New York, NY 10021) through April 22, 2018; frick.org

Bobbie Leigh has written for many national publications including The Wall Street Journal, Travel & Leisure, and Departures. Currently she is a New York correspondent for Art & Antiques.