



THE ART WORLD

BROTHERHOOD

Francisco de Zurbarán's "Jacob and His Twelve Sons."

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

The Frick Collection has a surprise for us: a room-filling loan show of "Jacob and His Twelve Sons" (circa 1640-45), thirteen full-length, life-size imagined portraits, all but unknown in the United States until now, by the Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán. Twelve are from the dining room of Auckland Castle, in the small northeastern English town of Bishop Auckland, and one, reuniting the suite, is from another English collection. They constitute a terrific feat of Baroque storytelling: movies of

their day. All the characters—each a distinct personality uniquely posed, costumed, and accessorized, and towering against a bright, clouded sky and a low swath of sylvan scenery—appear to be approximately as old as they are in the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis. There the dying Jacob prophesies, in gorgeous verse, the fates of the founders-to-be of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Some will fare better than others: poorly, in the case of the eldest, Reuben, "unstable as water," and in the cases of the second and

third, Simeon and Levi, "for in their anger they killed men," and very well indeed in those of Judah, from whom the "sceptre shall not depart," and—of course—Joseph, "a fruitful bough" once sold into slavery by his brothers and subsequently their benefactor as the overlord of Egypt. (No, I haven't read Thomas Mann's tetralogy, "Joseph and His Brothers"—to my acute and, on deadline, irremediable regret. Note to friends: please stop telling me how wonderful it is!) The show enthralls in numerous ways.

Start with a mysterious provenance. There is no record of the suite's existence before 1722, when it turns up among the assets of an English merchant and director of the then lately collapsed South Sea Company. The paintings were surely made in Seville, a former center of Muslim power that had become the economic hub and most cosmopolitan city of the Spanish Empire, in or near which Zurbarán spent most of his life, and likely were destined for the Spanish Americas, at the time a market hungry for art from the mother country. The popularity of the theme in the colonies owed something to a speculation that the New World's indigenous natives were descendants of the ten Lost Tribes, which had vanished from history. (Related works, including copies from Zurbarán's series, reside in Puebla, Mexico, and in Lima, Peru.) An old tale holds that the paintings were seized in the mid-Atlantic from a Spanish ship by English pirates, but with no evidence on that account. The ultimate buyer, in 1756, of all but one of them, Richard Trevor, the Anglican Bishop of Durham, particularly prized their exalting of Old Testament Scripture. He was a passionate promoter of Jewish civil rights who, in the House of Lords, in 1753, had helped pass an act of Parliament naturalizing Jews as citizens, though the measure was soon repealed, in the face of anti-Semitic popular outrage. The clergyman's sense of the works seems not to have been limited to a common Christian interpretation of Jacob and his sons as coded premonitions of Jesus and his dozen disciples.

It is interesting to note, as a side-light, the single canvas that got away

A detail from "Joseph," Zurbarán's magisterial depiction of Jacob's eleventh son.

from Trevor to a higher bidder: “Benjamin,” depicting the father’s adored youngest boy. It is the liveliest, though not nearly the best, painting of the bunch. The subject, “a ravenous wolf” in Jacob’s approving view, is portrayed from the side, twisting cutely to glance at the viewer while leading a rather doggy wolf on a chain. (Zurbarán wasn’t always a dab hand with animals, as witness, too, the tutelary lion, resembling less the king of beasts than Bert Lahr, in “Judah.”) Benjamin’s voguish, faux-rustic garments include a red suit tied up with yellow ribbon bows. The background features stately ruins. In stylistic flavor, “Benjamin” most closely approaches the eighteenth-century English taste for portraits of fetching individuals in fancy dress.

Zurbarán was the second-best painter in seventeenth-century Spain, no disgrace when the champion, his Seville-born near-exact contemporary, happened to be Diego Velázquez, who arguably remains better than anybody, ever. Velázquez landed the country’s one plum job for an artist, as chief painter to King Philip IV, in Madrid, where he could bring to peak refinement his astonishing naturalism, with secular subjects in sophisticated company. Zurbarán had to subsist ad hoc, often on commissions from religious orders that tethered him to pious subjects. But an independent and even a liberal spirit seethes in his art, which took form, like that of Velázquez, amid a convergence of innovations from Italy and from Spanish-ruled Flanders. Thought to be largely self-taught, with a shaky grasp of perspective that made him wisely avoid trying to render deep space, Zurbarán came to be called the Spanish Caravaggio, for his theatrical manipulations of light and shadow, although his knowledge of the revolutionary Italian may not have extended to seeing any original paintings by him.

He poeticized the stern predilections of the Counter-Reformation, which sparked both glories in art and terrors in life—in particular, the Inquisition, which especially targeted “crypto” remnants of the Jewish pop-

ulation that had been expelled from Spain in 1492. Epitomizing the moment are Zurbarán’s darkling portrayals of saints and monks in ecstatic prayer. His art lost clerical patronage, late in his life, to the softened, high-fructose manner of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. (By happenstance, the Frick has a concurrent show of pretty good portraits by Murillo in its basement galleries.) Zurbarán was almost forgotten until French aesthetes rediscovered him, along with other neglected Old Masters, including Vermeer, in the nineteenth century.

The “Jacob” paintings are unsigned—indicating a substantial role in their execution by Zurbarán’s assistants, who, incidentally, may well be immortalized in the realistic faces of the figures—and uneven in quality. In addition, after nearly four centuries, the canvases sorely need cleaning. The brilliance of their colors has dimmed, notably in passages of brocade and other sumptuous fabrics—a forte of Zurbarán, whose father was a haberdasher. (At least one hue is defunct: that of the pigment smalt blue, which blackens with age.) But most of the pictures retain power aplenty. Spend time with them, half an hour minimum. Their glories bloom slowly, as you register the formal decisions that practically spring the figures from their surfaces into the room with you, and as you ponder, if you will, the stories that they plumb. Near-masterpieces include the regally attired “Asher,” who in Jacob’s words “shall provide royal delicacies,” carrying a basket of bread loaves that display Zurbarán’s subtle mastery of still-life, and “Dan,” who “shall be a snake by the roadside” (apparently, a good thing for a man associated with judges) and who gestures blithely, as if speaking to someone out of frame, while wielding a live serpent on a stick. Finest of all is “Joseph,” as profound a painting as its subject is a foundational personage in the world’s religious heritage.

Joseph was Jacob’s eleventh son. He infuriated his brothers by being their father’s pet and by guilelessly telling them dreams that suggested

that he would come to dominate them. While they debated killing him, a caravan of foreign traders happened by, so they sold him, instead, and stained his cloak with goat’s blood, as evidence that a wild animal had eaten him. His adventures in Egypt—he was the household manager for the palace-guard captain Potiphar, an object of unrequited lust and of vengeance by Potiphar’s wife, and a prisoner, before being promoted to the Pharaoh’s right hand for interpreting the ruler’s dreams that foretold a seven-year famine—led to a fraternal drama. His brothers (except Benjamin, at home because Jacob was loath to ever part from him) came to Egypt in quest of food and were at his mercy. They didn’t recognize him. Joseph put them to hard tests before revealing his identity. Redeemed in his eyes by their proven loyalty to Benjamin, they and the entire family were granted choice land by the Pharaoh. (For how that arrangement turned out eventually—no spoilers here—skip ahead to Exodus.) What must Joseph have been like?

As envisioned by Zurbarán, he is properly magisterial, wearing fantastic raiment trimmed in fur and gold. His face appears between a medallioned, lustrous blue scarf and a massive red-and-blue turban that casts a shadow across his eyes. He is still young but has an air of seasoned maturity. His expression is watchful—unillusioned—but he doesn’t seem temperamentally so: there is a lingering sweetness about him. He is a man of extraordinary intelligence and heart, disciplined by experience. To meet his gaze is to feel his strict justice and his reserve of compassion. I believe that only Zurbarán himself could have imagined, much less painted, that face. The Counter-Reformation didn’t fancy tolerance. (As a boy of ten, the artist would have been aware of the mass expulsion from Spain, in 1609, of the descendants of Moors, like that of the Jews before them—actions self-destructive for the nation’s cultural fertility.) But Zurbarán’s humanized righteousness, like Velázquez’s crystalline acumen, catches a fleeting glint of civil grace in history’s dusky promenade. ♦