'Jacob and His Twelve Sons': Zurbarán's Biblical All-Stars

NYT Critic's Pick

By **JASON FARAGO** MARCH 14, 2018

Some of the life-size paintings in "Zurbarán's Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings From Auckland Castle,"at the Frick Collection
Michael Bodycomb

For much of European art history, religious authorities had the whip hand when it came to painting: They controlled the imagery, owned the prime real estate and could pay top ducat for the best work. These days, the ranks of the European faithful have thinned, though, and many congregations — even the cash-flush Church of England — have paid for upkeep by clearing out their artistic assets.

About 10 years ago, the English church tried to sell off a dozen paintings in Auckland Castle, the former home of the bishops of Durham: full-length portraits of the biblical Jacob and 11 of his 12 sons, painted in the 1640s by the earthy Spanish master Francisco de Zurbarán. (A 13th painting, of Jacob's youngest son, Benjamin, belongs to an aristocratic collection.) An appeal went out, a pious financier stepped up, and, holy of holies, both the Zurbaráns and the castle are now owned by a charitable trust.

Auckland Castle in County Durham, England, the home of 12 of the Zurbarán portraits. It is currently closed for restoration.
Neill Watson/The Auckland Project — Zurbarán Trust

Auckland Castle is currently closed for restoration, with a view to exhibiting religious art of the past and present, and its 12 Zurbaráns — united with the 13th, happily — are on an American holiday. After an initial outing at the Meadows Museum in Dallas, they've arrived at the Frick Collection, where they ring a single gallery like benevolent watchmen. Vital, innovative and lying in obscurity for too long, these life-size biblical portraits display a painterly frankness that seems to be calling modern art into being centuries ahead of its time. (The exhibition, "Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings From Auckland Castle" is the second half of a Spanish Golden Age double feature at the Frick this season; earlier, that museum hosted a fine showcase of portraiture by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Zurbarán's younger and slightly more decorous colleague in Seville.)

Zurbarán was born in 1598 in Extremadura, a landlocked region, and in his teens was shipped off by his father to apprentice as a painter in wealthy seaside Seville. But he learned most of the rudiments of painting himself, and unlike his friend and rival Diego Velázquez, he forswore royal and aristocratic portraiture for almost exclusively religious scenes, which he painted for local churches and for the booming market in the Spanish Americas. At his death in 1664, he was unknown outside Spain, barely visible outside Andalusia. Zurbarán only soared into the canon in the 1840s, when the Louvre opened its Galerie Espagnole, and Parisians discovered his frank, no-nonsense pictures of saints in agony and ecstasy.

But long before the Zurbarán revival, Richard Trevor, a progressive and fabulously wealthy English bishop, acquired nearly the full set of biblical portraits, which had somehow turned up in a London auction house in the mid-18th century. (We're not sure how they got to England. The Frick show's robust catalog details that Zurbarán probably painted the works for export to the New World, but they never made it there.) In 1756, Bishop Trevor hung them in Auckland Castle's dining room, where they had more than decorative impact. The bishop was a keen defender of English Jews, who were enfranchised by an act of Parliament in 1753, only to see the act repealed a year later amid anti-Semitic public protest. Diners at the bishop's table would have sat under the reproving gazes of these Old Testament figures, Jewish forefathers of the church's good fortune.

Jacob, the patriarch, appears in an olive-colored turban and a simple red tunic, his white beard cascading to the top of the cane over which he hunches. His 12 sons, by contrast, fill the height of each six-and-a-half-foot canvas; they pose frontally, in profile or from behind, and they wear a startling variety of crisp, supple fabrics, whose glamour or grittiness echoes Jacob's foretelling of their destinies in the Book of Genesis. (One theory about Zurbarán's fashion fixation: His father was a haberdasher.)

Reuben, the eldest son, echoes Jacob by wearing a lofty turban, while Simeon has on a savage animal pelt, and Levi, his back to us, sports an embroidered robe and eye-popping boots studded with pearls. In these paintings and the others, Zurbarán places the figures against landscapes whose horizon is slung low, so that the brothers appear to tower over the earth.

Judah, son No. 4 and the ancestor of Kings David and Solomon, faces front in a fur-trimmed gown, toting a scepter and standing beside a kindly lion. ("A lion's whelp," Jacob calls Judah in Genesis.) He appears far more august than the next six brothers, who are kitted out in an array of military, mercantile and peasant clothing.

Joseph is depicted holding a document that recalls his position as adviser to the Egyptian pharaoh.
Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust

Only Joseph, standing in stately semi-profile and holding a legal document that recalls his position as adviser to the Egyptian pharaoh, wears clothing of equal worth: a blue sash with a jewel-studded pin, a fur collar, a belt stitched with gold. To my eye, Judah and Joseph are easily the two most captivating of the 13 portraits here, but your opinion may vary. The painting of Naphtali, for instance, half-dressed in a rough brown cloak and toting a shovel over his shoulder, has an unpretentious beauty that recalls Jean-François Millet's later ennoblements of French peasants.

Naphtali, barefoot and dressed in a rough brown cloak, is depicted as a farm worker.
The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust

These portraits of the progenitors of the Twelve Tribes of Israel are spryer and less mystical than Zurbarán's more Caravaggesque — and more famous — tortured saints, like the ascetic, cloaked St. Francis kneeling in sepulchral darkness in the National Gallery of London. Yet just as much as in the darker pictures, a majority of these biblical portraits display an exactitude of characterization that belies the frisky, open brushwork Zurbarán favored. Their shallow, upright orientation also allowed him to condense the dozen men into streamlined form, without ever reducing his models to icons. This is the proto-modernity that would eventually enthrall Manet and the other Spain-smitten Frenchmen who forged Modern painting in the 1860s.

Benjamin, the 12th and youngest son of Jacob, is accompanied by a wolf on a leash.
The Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust

In the final painting, on loan from Grimsthorpe Castle in northern England, Benjamin, accompanied by a wolf on a leash, casts his gaze over his shoulder with a teenager's swagger, his lips pursed, his elbow thrust jauntily to the right. (This work came to New York once before: for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 1988 Zurbarán exhibition, the only such show ever in the United States.) Look at this confident, unbothered youngster, and then start again with his father, a trickster and a wrestler in his own youth, who wears the same reds and greens as his last child but is now bent toward the earth. These paintings may be prizes of religion and milestones in art history, but they are, no less, portraits of the human condition.

Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings From Auckland Castle
Through April 22 at the Frick Collection, Manhattan; 212-288-0700, frick.org.