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Courtesy of The Frick Collection

Patriarchs in the making

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The story of the Auckland Castle Zurbarans is almost as rich as the works themselves. The thirteen paintings depicting Jacob and his twelve sons were painted in the 1640s in Seville, Francisco de Zurbarán's home city. They remained undocumented until 1727, when they appeared on the London art market and were sold to a Jewish Portuguese merchant called James Méndez on his death in 1756, they were acquired by Bishop Richard Trevor of Durham for his episcopal seat, Auckland Castle.

Bishop Trevor was an ardent supporter of the Jewish Naturalization Bill (1753) and conceivably acquired the works for their typological significance: the twelve sons of Jacob – the Patriarchs – prefigure the Apostles of Christ. He bought twelve of the thirteen paintings. “Benjamin”, one of the finest, had been sold to the Willoughby de Eresby collection at Grimsthorpe Castle (now generously lent to the exhibition *Zurbarán’s Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle*, which runs at the Frick Collection, New York, until April 22). The main body of the series has remained at Auckland Castle to this day, installed in the Long Dining Room of the Bishop of Durham’s residence as it has been since the eighteenth century.

In 2010 the region and the diocese were experiencing hard times, and the Church Commissioners, to the consternation of many, suggested selling the works for £15 million. Then, like a figure from a Brecht play, Jonathan Ruffer, a prominent banker, philanthropist and Anglican, stepped in and offered to buy them. After some to-ing and fro-ing with the Church Commissioners, he secured them for Auckland Castle and added a further gift of £10 million to launch an ambitious heritage and cultural site.

What makes this story all the more extraordinary is that Zurbarán was virtually unknown outside Andalucía until the middle of the nineteenth century. What hastened his recognition was his formidable presence at the Galerie Espagnole in the Louvre, the brainchild of Louis-Philippe, whose agents had removed more than 400 paintings from Spain. Zurbarán was represented by some eighty paintings (many shop pieces and copies) – more than Velazquez, Murillo and Ribera. Yet here he was, embedded in one of the grandest episcopal palaces in Britain, with Jacob and his Twelve Sons, though attributed in the 1860s to Ribera.

Recollected in the East Gallery of the Frick Collection, the thirteen works form one of the noblest, most imposing rooms of painting in New York. Life-size, monumentally conceived, with the figures towering over landscapes nestling at their feet, they look like Patriarchs in the making. Edward Payne, the Senior Curator of Spanish Painting at Auckland Castle, has diligently tracked down the sources of their poses in northern prints, but variations of pose and attitude in each of these heavily capped and caparisoned figures ensures that the marks of individual character are preserved. Benjamin, a most winning figure, turns his head to the viewer even as his body makes off in the opposite direction, his right arm intricately slung behind him.

All the sons are equipped with an attribute according to the text of the Blessings of Jacob (Genesis 49). For Benjamin, “a ravenous wolf” pushes his snout into a shoulder bag where his brother Joseph will hide the silver cup when his brothers depart from Egypt. Joseph, once sold into slavery by those same brothers, rises to become the trusted vizier of the Pharaoh, able to interpret dreams. He holds the rod of office and a petition. His turban is so fantastically modelled that, although made of cloth, it sits on him like a crown. Zurbarán takes every opportunity to exploit and enlarge his pictorial forms in dress. Judah, “a lion’s whelp”, appears as the King of Israel with crown and sceptre and a magnificent brocaded gown, reminding us that Zurbarán is the grand master of expressive drapery.

There are moments of insight and compassion. Reuben, the eldest who will inherit nothing because he defiled Jacob’s bed with his concubine, Bilhah, is left clinging to a falling column, immersed in his own gloomy, pointless thoughts. The most touching of all is Jacob himself, whose magnificent bony hands support the weight of ages on a single stick. Bowed and bent, he is the outsider such as Courbet or Manet might have recognized in the Galerie Espagnole where the legendary has been stripped to the painful quotidian.

It is quite extraordinary that a group of seventeenth-century masterworks from the golden age of Spanish painting by a major artist should be virtually unknown except to scholars and connoisseurs (and enthusiastic locals) and that their existence is only now made known to an international audience. New York is fortunate to have glimpsed them before they return to their northern fastness.

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