

The Bishop's Elders of Israel

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Zurbarán's Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle

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If the standard you expect from Francisco de Zurbarán is set by one of his devotional images—by, for instance, the *Saint Serapion* at the Wadsworth Atheneum, in which the dying saint is hung by ropes tied to his arms, and the painter has apparently lavished the most attention on the creamy white robes of the Mercedarian Order, leaving only the graying tones of the exhausted face and the hands to tell the story of torture and death—then it will not be without a little stab of disappointment that you survey the thirteen paintings, *Jacob and His Twelve Sons*, on display at the Frick. Extreme beauty lies in extreme suffering—that is what the painter of *Saint Serapion* seems to be saying. But this extremism—something to be at once admired and feared in Spanish art—is absent from the *Jacob* series.

Absent because inappropriate. One is not invited to contemplate, say, the life and sufferings of Reuben, Jacob's first-born son, in the way one is encouraged to meditate upon the self-sacrifice of Serapion. Reuben was no saint. When the dying Jacob made his prophetic remarks about his sons (the so-called Blessing of Jacob in Genesis 49), he began by effectively cursing Reuben:

Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might and the first fruits of my vigor, excelling in rank and excelling in power. Unstable as water, you shall no longer excel because you went up onto your father's bed; then you defiled it—you went up onto my couch!

Reuben's descendants will not prosper because Reuben defiled his father's bed by making love to Jacob's



Francisco de Zurbarán: Joseph, circa 1640–1645

Auckland Project/Zurbarán Trust/Robert LaPrelle

concubine, Bilhah. One might say in Reuben's defense that he was also the one who persuaded his brothers not to kill Joseph when they were planning to do just that, out of envious irritation at his self-serving dreams. But that did not redeem him in Jacob's eyes. Strong as the pillar he grasps, Reuben stands there with downcast eyes, in one of a series of thirteen life-size paintings whose earliest history is unknown.

Unknown but not particularly mysterious in the setting of European painting. This notion of a series of subjects—and better still a numbered series—is a mainstay of painting and the graphic and decorative arts: the Four Evangelists, the Twelve Disciples, the Twelve Labors of Hercules, the Virtues and the Vices, the Planets, the Continents, the Nine Worthies (three Pagans, three Jews, and three Christians). Artists thrived on such series, just as they thrived on biblical narratives, including the story of Joseph and his Brethren. The engravers of Northern Europe loved to create sets of prints, which were then disseminated and freely plundered for their images. Potters, metalworkers, sculptors, and painters all used such material. Zurbarán himself is said to have owned seventy-four prints and he drew on such sources for these thirteen paintings.

The remarkable series of Jacob and his sons at the Frick has hung since the eighteenth century in the bishop of Durham's palace at Bishop Auckland, in northeast England. An unusual treasure to find in an Anglican bishop's palace given Protestant horror at religious imagery, it is notable as being the only such series of paintings known to survive in Europe. Nobody knows for whom or for what kind of building these life-size imaginary portraits were painted. Their scale, at more than six feet tall, suggests a large room and an important commission. Intriguingly, two similar series have survived in the New World, one in Lima, Peru, and one in Puebla, Mexico. (A third series, now in Mexico City, is much later and on a much smaller scale.)

Zurbarán's studio is known to have sent paintings to the New World. It is suggested that the Bishop Auckland paintings were made in fulfillment of a commission from the New World, but for some reason they were never sent. This suggestion in turn leads to

speculation that there was something about the subject that was of particular relevance to the New World. Were not its indigenous peoples explicable as descendants of the Lost Tribes of Israel? Perhaps the identities of the sons of Jacob held a particular local significance for the church in Mexico and Peru.

It's an attractive line of thinking, but it is surely fair to point out that the sample size in this survey could hardly be smaller—the two series in the Americas and the one in England. Painted in the early 1640s, the Bishop Auckland group is first recorded as being in the possession of a British merchant, Sir William Chapman, who went broke and was arrested after the collapse of the South Sea Bubble. His effects, including the Zurbaráns, were auctioned off, and the thirteen paintings went to a Jewish merchant of Sephardic descent, James Mendez. One would like to know more about this character, described as an eclectic collector, and in what style he lived in London and Surrey in the 1720s. The catalog suggests that the portrait of Judah could have appealed to Mendez as a descendant of his royal tribe. The whole series of course could be seen as ancestor portraits.

The next owner of all but one of the set (he had the missing painting copied) was Richard Trevor, bishop of Durham, who acquired them in 1756. In those days the bishops of Durham had immense resources at their disposal from coal mining. They had a residence in Durham City, in the castle. And they had their palace in Bishop Auckland, which Bishop Trevor spent much time improving. That he had a taste for Spanish art—or indeed any art at all—is to me continually surprising. The Anglican Church had long since passed through the iconoclastic phase of the Reformation, but was still distinctly ambivalent about religious imagery (especially within church premises). Durham Cathedral at this time was without its old altarpieces, and the wall paintings had been either removed or whited out.

Yet here in his palace the bishop installed not only the portraits of Jacob and his sons, but also a series by an unknown artist from Granada of the Twelve Apostles, together with Abraham Bloemaert's *Four Fathers of the Latin Church* (now in Utrecht). It looks like a very Catholic display. The Bloemaert, it is true, had been doctrinally toned down. The Four Fathers of the Catholic Church (Saints Augustine, Jerome, Ambrose, and Gregory) are shown in front of an altar on which the Eucharistic host is displayed in a gold monstrance—except that in the eighteenth century this monstrance, a red flag to the Anglican bull, was painted out.

Quite how all this imagery was read by Bishop Trevor's contemporaries, and whether it was intended or seen as a coherent program, is hard to say. The catalog emphasizes that Bishop Trevor had been a strong supporter of the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753, which was passed, but proved too controversial and was repealed within months. Under this act, resident Jews in Britain were able to become citizens, which would have allowed them to take university degrees and hold public office. The bishop took the view that the Jews, despite their current

condition, were reserved for a better future. At the moment, he wrote, they exist

in a State of Unbelief, throughout almost every country under Heaven.—A Case unparalleled in the History of any other Nation; the singularity of whose Circumstances demands our most awful and religious Regard; God herein exhibiting to our View, in their Dispersion, the apparent Fulfilling of his Judgments denounced against this hitherto obstinate and impenitent People; and at the same Time, by their *distinct* and *separate* Existence, giving a Pledge as it were of better Things to come, and an Earnest of his future gracious Dispensations towards them.

The catalog suggests that, with its interplay of Apostles, Patriarchs, and Latin Fathers, the bishop's program illustrated the links between the faiths and the reason for supporting Jewish naturalization. That would have been ingenious, if true.

Zurbarán was the last of the great Spanish painters to receive international recognition. As Gabriele Finaldi reminds us, in 1994, when the paintings were brought to the National Gallery in London for exhibition, the series was practically unknown. I grew up in Durham and have no recollection of anyone talking about Zurbarán the way they talked about El Greco's *Tears of Saint Peter* at the Bowes Museum in nearby Barnard Castle.

"And weren't you," somebody asked me after the National Gallery show, "just slightly disappointed?" I wondered what the honest answer would be. Maybe just a little stab. But in those days I had not yet seen *Saint Serapion*. Thinking about the series recently, I wondered if there might not be something odd about the idiom and the scale. If you imagine them as a set of large-format tarot cards (roughly the size of the main illustrations in the catalog), they seem to gain something, just for a moment. If then you turn to Appendix 1, which shows the paintings reduced to roughly the same size as their print sources, the idiom shifts again and you see how much they retain, in their simple compositions, of the Northern engravings by Jacques de Gheyn II, Philips Galle, Martin Schongauer, or Albrecht Dürer from which many of their details derive... things tiny by comparison with those six-foot-tall canvases, primed with Sevillean earth. One imagines these prints pinned up in the artist's studio, to be enlarged upon.

We cannot quite tell what it is we are seeing—to what extent, for instance, the conservator's hand in the eighteenth century worked to establish more uniform skies from one canvas to the next, or how much old varnish we are peering through. We are told that important pigments have simply darkened. Nothing can reverse that process. So what comes across as the subdued gorgeousness of the textiles may once have been richer and brighter. On the whole, though, they have survived very well, their strangeness intact. The bishop's palace has been sold, and the Zurbaráns too—fortunately to the same purchaser. The plan is to keep them together and make sense of this odd episcopal history. □