

# An offer that could not be refused

Renovation work in a British castle gave the Israel Museum a rare opportunity to display 17th-century Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbaran's portraits of Jacob and his sons

Maya Asheri

There are opportunities that are not to be missed. One day early this year, Shlomit Steinberg, the senior curator for European art of the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, and Yehudit Amsalem, of the museum's international relations department, burst into the office of the museum's new director, Ido Bruno, who at the time had been in the job for only two months, and placed a ticking bomb on his desk.

The Spanish Friends of the Israel Museum had informed them that there was a rare opportunity to bring "Jacob and His Twelve Sons," a series of 13 paintings by 17th-century Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbaran, to Israel and exhibit them. But the window of opportunity for making the decision to do so and to produce and open the exhibition was very limited: less than four months.

That is a very short timetable for a large institution like the Israel Museum, where the exhibition schedule is meticulously planned many months in advance. All the potential exhibition spaces were spoken for, money for mounting the show would need to be found, and a lot of curatorial study of the material would be required.

Bruno heard the story and understood the difficulties, but he jumped at the chance. That's how this exhibition became his first curatorial decision as museum director. "This is the shortest amount of time I've ever done an exhibition in," said Steinberg about a week before the opening, which took place last Friday. "Something like this has never happened even to me, a certified nutcase."

When Bruno was asked a month ago, in a debut interview with Haaretz after assuming his new position, why he had decided to go with the exhibition, he gave a very rational explanation: "Zurbaran is a very good and very interesting artist, who has never been displayed in Israel. The paintings themselves are amazing too. So first of all, it meets the basic condition – is it good. Second, it's of high quality, these are paintings that are over 300 years old, and there's the biblical context, which is relevant to both Christians and Jews."

But when you see the paintings themselves – and learn about the fascinating and mysterious story behind them – it turns out that the

headlong dive taken by the museum may indeed have been rational, but that it also was based on a great deal of imagination. The story of the paintings, from the time they were created in Zurbaran's studio in Seville in 1640 and up unto the present day, is one of bishops and pirates, English castles and South American traditions, a battle by England's Jews for their civil rights, and real estate transactions.

The paintings themselves, 13 portraits, each one two



Shlomit Steinberg *Emil Salman*

meters in height, are full of details and present Jacob and each one of his sons as an entire world.

## A gesture to the Jewish people

Scholars have confirmed that Francisco de Zurbaran (1598-1664), a Spanish painter who specialized in religious images that were usually sold to monasteries and churches, painted the Jacob series between 1640 and 1645 in his studio in Seville. The first written record of the works, however, is only from 1720, about 75 years later.

"They appeared one day in 1720 on the British market at a public auction and were purchased by [Portuguese] Jewish merchant James Mendez," says Steinberg. "We don't know what kind of merchandise he sold, but we know that he was a wealthy man of property. And one of his properties was a big house in Surrey, to which he brought the 13 works and hung them."

What happened to the paintings between the time of their creation and their appearance in England is shrouded in mystery. The prevailing assumption is that Zurbaran painted the series for clients in the New World, in South America, and was supposed to send it to its destination when it was completed. "It's a documented fact that Zurbaran worked regularly and successfully with South America. He had orders from Buenos Aires, Mexico, Peru," says Steinberg. "He worked via relatives who lived there and via seafarers who would take merchandise from Spanish artists and sell them."

Another piece of evidence is a letter written by Zurbaran in 1660 and addressed to his connections in Buenos Aires, in which he complains that 11 years earlier he had sent a series of 13 huge pictures of "the Patriarchs" (a reference to Jacob and his 12 sons), and had never received the payment that was coming to him. "And so," says Steinberg, "as early as 1948, scholars formulated a theory, which is not entirely baseless but is also completely unfounded, that the works were dispatched in the direction of South America, but were hijacked on the high seas by pirates."

There are also other theories, admits Steinberg with some amusement, but the one with the pirates played an important role in bringing the paintings to awareness. "The nice aspect of this story is that there were also Jewish pirates during that period, and they really did work for English ships against the Spanish. There were several glorious pirates who claimed that they would take revenge against the Spaniards for expelling the Jews. Now who knows if it's true, but this aroused great curiosity among Spanish scholars, who in the 1940s began to examine this collection."

The Jewish element adds seasoning to the rest of the story too. "In 1749 the Jewish merchant Mendez passed away, and the person who handled his estate sold the paintings in 1757 to Bishop Richard Trevor," continues Steinberg. Trevor, the Bishop of Durham, lived in Auckland Castle in northern England, the permanent home of the paintings to this day.

"Bishop Trevor had an enlightened agenda: He claimed that England had to open its borders to the Jews and to grant those living there the right to become citizens and to be like anyone else, the Bill of Rights. That apparently didn't happen then, but by buying the paintings, he felt that he had made some sort of gesture to the Jewish people."

The bishop hung the large paintings in his home – in the dining room, around the table. "He actually caused a situation in which all those who didn't like Jews much, and who may not have sup-

ported his attempt to enfranchise the Jews – found themselves, when they came to the castle, surrounded by the forefathers of the Jewish people."

## Pearls on his shoes

As noted, the show was set up in near-record speed as well. The paintings arrived at the Israel Museum less than a week before the opening, and to accommodate them, one of the European-art galleries had to be quickly emptied of its canvases, which are part of the museum's permanent exhibition. Many of these items were relegated to the storeroom, while several of the most popular and important works in the museum's collection – paintings by Rembrandt and by French

that period, and displaying it is intended to place the Zurbaran paintings in a historical context.

The differences between Jacob and his sons as they are portrayed in the paintings, and certainly the signs that identify them, really are exciting and multilayered. The writ of appointment (as adviser to Pharaoh) in the hand of Joseph, who is dressed differently from the rest (a hint at his years and his seniority in Egypt); the magnificent clothing of Judah, who is designated to establish the royal dynasty; Dan's magic staff and snake; and the staff of their father, the patriarch Jacob.

Although she saw the paintings up close only a few days before the opening, Steinberg studied them in

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Two paintings from the exhibition.



Robert LaPrelle/Zurbaran Trust

classical painter Nicolas Poussin – were temporarily hung in other galleries. At the same time, Steinberg decided to add a personal touch to the Zurbaran show.

The paintings have not been displayed according to the sons' order of birth, but according to the order of their appearance in Jacob's blessing before his death, at the end of the book of Genesis (Gen. 49) – in other words, according to their mothers. "That's how it was always displayed, that was their classic order. I didn't take great liberties," said Steinberg. "The only liberty I'm taking is to place Asher and Dan together on the main wall, because they're simply very beautiful, they're my favorites. But all the rest, we'll distribute according to the order of the blessing."

In addition, Steinberg will place next to Jacob, who will open the exhibition, a 16th-century book of cosmography from the museum's collection. This work of geography documents Seville of

detail and talks about them with love and enthusiasm. "You can see that there are several very impressive men here: For example, Reuben, the firstborn, who stands frontally and is very handsome," she says, pointing and explaining. "On the other hand, Naftali is the simplest one, he has a hard lot: He's going to be a farmer, he doesn't even have proper clothing, he has these pieces of cloth that he can spread over himself and cover himself with, and then bunch them up."

"Their sandals too – some are wearing sandals and some have shoes. Levi's shoes are threaded with pearls, but Issachar has a pair of shoes that are so worn out they're almost transparent. Some of them have the gnarled and sinewy hands of working men – I was really impressed by the hands of the elderly Jacob, we forget that he was once a shepherd. And then there are the hands of Joseph, one can see that he is a vizier who hasn't done

anything that's physically strenuous."

When she gets to Benjamin, Steinberg reveals an open secret. He is the only one who doesn't belong to Zurbaran's original series – although he's an exact copy of the original. "We know that Bishop Trevor purchased 12 of the 13 works. He was unable to get his hand on Benjamin, because the owner said that he himself was a descendant of that tribe and he didn't want to sell it," she says with evident regret.

"So Trevor did something very simple: He turned to artist Arthur Pond, who was known not only for having worked in Italy – which was very prestigious – but for being an outstanding portrait painter. Bishop asked two things of him: To restore the picture of Joseph, which was not in such good condition, and to make an exact copy of Benjamin."

Steinberg actually did attempt to obtain the original Benjamin. "He eventually ended up in another private collection and when we wanted to borrow him we were told that the work had traveled too much and that physically it was in too fragile a condition. It's possible that the painting went through many hands while the others were in the same place all the time. I was disappointed and I even spoke to Auckland Castle, thinking the people there could intervene, and they told me to forget it, the Benjamin in our collection is much better."

Steinberg devoted a substantial part of the short time at her disposal to reading. About Zurbaran, about Seville, and about the portrayal of Jacob and his sons in general in the art of the period. That's how she became convinced that the paintings really were originally destined for the American continent.





Paintings by artist Francisco de Zurbarán on display at the exhibition “Jacob and His Twelve Sons,” now showcased in Jerusalem’s Israel Museum, and Auckland Castle.

*Emil Salmon, barnyz, Museo del Prado, Auckland Castle*

“The theologian Saint Isidore of Seville, who lived in the sixth and seventh centuries, claimed that the 10 tribes of Israel who were scattered all over the world are the historical precedent for Jesus’ disciples, who were also scattered all over the world to spread the gospel.

“Eventually, when the territories of South America were discovered, one of the religious viewpoints was, look, we’ve found the lost Israelites. That is also why it was so important for the South Americans to display these series of Jacob and his sons again. In Europe this series – not only that of Zurbarán but in general the subject of “the patriarchs” – wasn’t popular at all. So what we actually have here is a kind of *mélange* of Judaism and Christianity, Spain and South America, and lots of drama.”

The narrow window of opportunity for displaying the exhibition in Israel – through October 2, 2018 – became possible for a prosaic reason: renovations. The paintings have been hanging in Auckland Castle since 1750.

For most of this period they didn’t leave the building. In 2011 private investor Jonathan Ruffer bought the castle with all its contents, and began to rehabilitate it before turning the area into a tourism complex.

Because in any case the paintings had to be removed from the building, they were sent on a short exhibition and research tour, of which Israel is the last stop. The last time the paintings left the castle was 23 years ago. The present tour began with laboratory examinations – the first to be conducted for these paintings – before they arrived on American soil for the first time.

First they were displayed at the Meadows Museum in Dallas, Texas, followed by the Frick Collection, the small but prestigious New York museum (“For us it was a confirmation of high quality,” says Steinberg). In October, when the works come down in Israel, they will return home to the renovated castle, and there’s no knowing whether or when they will be removed again.