RIBERA

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Art of Violence

Edward Payne
and Xavier Bray

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JUSEPE DE RIBERA (1591–1652)

A Biographical Sketch

Edward Payne

Jusepe de Ribera is a hybrid figure, a man straddling two countries, Spain and Italy, and two artistic idioms, painterly and graphic. Born in Játiva, Valencia, in 1591, he spent most of his career in Naples, where he significantly shaped the course of artistic production in the seventeenth century. Little is known of his youth, training and journey from Spain to Italy. Ribera is first recorded in Rome in 1606, in Parma in 1611, and in Naples from 1616 until his death in 1652. After settling in Italy, Ribera encountered the revolutionary paintings of Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, whose distinctive 'realist' qualities he adopted in his own work: employing dark backgrounds, heightening the contrast between light and shade, using live models and rendering attentively surface appearances. Yet, unlike Caravaggio, who famously did not make drawings on paper, Ribera was both an extraordinary painter and a prolific graphic artist. He produced a remarkable corpus of drawings as well as an important group of prints, and it is the strength of his works on paper – in addition to his paintings – that sets Ribera apart from his Caravaggist contemporaries. Ribera pushed the boundaries of Caravaggesque realism towards a raw, visceral form of representation, especially in his images of extreme violence, which are the subject of this catalogue.

As a young man, Ribera travelled to Rome where he studied classical sculpture and Renaissance art, notably works by Raphael, in addition to the paintings of Caravaggio and other contemporary artists. He was profoundly influenced by this range of visual sources and engaged with the artistic debates of his day. Among the works he produced in this period was a series of five paintings representing the five senses, which received significant praise. Nevertheless, the young artist inevitably encountered competition in the Eternal City, which attracted many other foreign painters, for example the northern followers of Caravaggio. If it was not his debts that triggered his departure, then it was the need and desire to secure patronage.

The artist's definitive move to Naples, in 1616, could not have been better timed. Naples was then a Spanish territory governed by viceroys appointed by the king of Spain. Just before Ribera left Rome, the Duke of Osuna, former ambassador of Spain to Rome, was named Viceroy of Naples, an office which he held for four years. Ribera's decision to move south was probably informed by his intention to seek Osuna's patronage, as the duke went on to play a prominent part in rapidly advancing the artist's status. Indeed, the viceroys soon became Ribera's principal patrons, commissioning from the artist works for their personal collections as well as the Spanish Crown. One of Ribera's first commissions in Naples was a series of four saints – Bartholomew (Fig. 3.3), Sebastian, Jerome and Peter – figures whom Ribera represented on numerous occasions. A later example, *Saint Peter* from a private collection, demonstrates the artist's typical treatment of the subject: a live model poses as the saint, addressing the viewer directly in a pared-down composition with a dark background and dramatic contrast of light and shadow (Fig. 1.1). Ribera served the viceroys for the majority of his life, producing not only religious paintings of penitent saints and suffering martyrs,

1.1
Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Saint Peter, *c*.1644
Oil on canvas, 81 × 66 cm
Abelló Collection, Madrid

‘HARSHER THAN JUPITER’

The Myth of Ribera

Edward Payne

‘It is remarkable that all the painters with a powerful style had a turbulent life: dramatic and stormy, full of thrills and unhappiness.... Ribera’s life, above all, was a long contrast of splendour and misery, of deep shadow and brilliant light, just like his painting.’[1]

Charles Blanc, *Histoire des peintres de toutes les écoles*, 1869

The Spanish artist Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652) has long been described as cruel, harsh and violent. In 1633 he completed a series of four paintings representing the mythological *Furias* or ‘Four Great Sinners’ – Tityus, Sisyphus, Tantalus and Ixion – for the Dutch collector, Lucas van Uffel.[2] The seventeenth-century German writer, Joachim von Sandrart, recounted the terrible effects that the series had on Jacopa, Lucas’s wife, who was so startled by the fingers of Ixion ‘crisped with pain’ that she gave birth to a child with deformed hands. The family subsequently rid themselves of this painting, which was then sent to Italy.[3] The version now in the Prado (Fig. 2.1) is not the one to which Sandrart refers, as it lacks the essential detail of Ixion’s contorted fingers. Its companion subject, *Tityus* (Fig. 2.2), is also mentioned by Sandrart, and while the anecdote about *Ixion* serves as a literary device, the emphasis on Ribera’s preference for violent themes set the tone for later responses to the artist’s work.

In his *Lives of the Eminent Spanish Painters and Sculptors* (1724), Antonio Palomino observes:

> Ribera did not enjoy painting sweet and devout subjects as much as he liked expressing horrifying and harsh things.... This is manifested by the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, in which he is being flayed and the internal anatomy of the arm is exposed, by the celebrated Tityus, whose entrails are being devoured by a vulture as a punishment for his wanton audacity, and by the torments of Sisyphus, Tantalus, and Ixion.[4]

Significantly, Palomino describes Ribera in terms of *depicting* scenes of violence rather than *inflicting* torture himself. However, the two activities are

Detail of Fig. 2.2

2.2
Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Tityus, 1632
Oil on canvas, 227 × 301 cm
Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid

and entries that follow explore the range of violent themes in Ribera's art, this essay traces the myth of Ribera as a violent artist, which unfolds in the early biographical writings and later critical fortunes.[9] These various sources reveal how Ribera's images of bodily extremes call attention to the problematic relationship between form and content, between the execution of a work of art and the 'execution' of violence. Indeed, Ribera draws on such violent subjects as flaying and the bound figure in order to comment critically on aspects of his own artistic practice. Heightening the tensions between the act of inflicting torture and the art of representing pain, Ribera ultimately blurs the boundaries between the making and unmaking of bodies and works.

Artistic Rivalry, or the Making of a Murderer

Historically, there has been a tendency to assume that because Ribera produced such violent imagery, he must also have had a violent personality. Unlike Caravaggio, who murdered a man in Rome, or Agostino Tassi, who raped the painter Artemisia Gentileschi, there is no documentary evidence for Ribera as criminal or sadist. Yet the biographical accounts set up an intriguing parallel between Ribera's executions of violent subjects and the story of his supposed hostility towards his arch-rival in painting, Domenichino.

The incident in question concerns the most prestigious commission in Naples, the decoration of the Cappella del Tesoro di San Gennaro in the Duomo (Fig. 2.3), which houses the relics of the city's patron saint.[10] The commission consisted of frescoes in the dome, lunettes and pendentives, and six large

2.7
Théodule-Augustin Ribot (1823–1891)
The Torture of Alonso Cano, 1867
Oil on canvas, 150 × 209 cm
Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen

it was simultaneously revived by Théodule-Augustin Ribot, a realist painter in Manet's circle, whose dark manner critics described as directly pastiching Ribera, both in form and content. This is clearly demonstrated by Ribot's *Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian* (Fig. 2.6), exhibited at the Salon of 1865, and deemed 'in the same spirit as Ribeira; as powerful as, if not more powerful than, Ribeira [*sic*]'.[30] Another critic, writing in the same year, considered that Ribot 'has the most violent temperament in the French school'.[31] Ribera's painting of *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women* (Cat. 31) may, in fact, have been Ribot's original source, translated in reverse, as both works are of landscape format with the body of Sebastian splayed on the ground, tended by Saint Irene and her companion, all of whom are set against a dark backdrop.[32]

Ribera's *Saint Sebastian* may also have inspired *The Torture of Alonso Cano* (Fig. 2.7), though the horizontality of the latter composition, and indeed the treatment of the subject, perhaps owe more to Ribera's *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* in the Palazzo Pitti, Florence (Cat. 1).[33] Considered 'a slavish copy of a work by [Ribera]', this painting by Ribot represents a gruesome episode from the life of the seventeenth-century painter, sculptor and architect Alonso Cano, who was wrongly accused of having murdered his wife and was brutally tortured in order to force a confession.[34] In contrast to Ribera's suffering saints, Ribot minimises the expression of pain to a single detail – the figure's toes clenching into fists – without diminishing the painting's dramatic impact. Although Ribot depicts a secular subject, he nonetheless treats it in the manner of Ribera's Christian martyrdom scenes.

Of all the works by Ribera which Ribot pastiched, none was in the former's 'classicising' style. This decision not only reveals Ribot's preference for darker themes, but also it inevitably shaped the image that his paintings created of the artist who had inspired them. That nineteenth-century French

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The Shock of the Real

Xavier Bray

'I like the confusion you get between science and religion...that's where belief lies and art as well.'[1]

Damien Hirst on his sculpture *Saint Bartholomew, Exquisite Pain*, 2008

Like all great port cities, Naples has an edge to it. In the seventeenth century, it was the second largest city in Europe after Paris, bustling with 300,000 inhabitants, a melting pot of trading communities ranging from Flemish to Catalans, Tuscans to Genoese. A vital Mediterranean port, it had been under Spanish rule since 1442 when it was taken from the French by Alfonso V of Aragon. The Spanish Habsburgs were represented by a viceroy who ruled over a somewhat unruly populace, amongst whom the clergy, the Neapolitan nobility and the resident merchant classes all competed for influence and power. When visiting Ribera in 1625, Jusepe Martínez described Naples as 'the most opulent city in all of Italy because of its many princes and grandees; [a city] whose greatness has seen more majesty than many kingdoms even though it is only a vice regency'.[2] Seafarers and merchants, however, brought with them epidemics and plagues, and the conduct of the consistently rebellious Neapolitan locals meant that life and death were held in a precarious balance. Looming over the city nine kilometres away was Mount Vesuvius, a volcano that threatened to erupt at any moment.[3]

It was in this atmosphere that the Spanish painter José de Ribera, or Jusepe de Ribera – lo Spagnoletto ('the Little Spaniard'), as he was nicknamed – settled in 1616, marrying a local artist's daughter and setting up a business.[4] Originally from Játiva, near Valencia in eastern Spain, Ribera left aged 15 to train as an artist in Italy, in the tradition of other Spanish artists since the Renaissance. Records show that he was based in Parma around 1611 before moving to Rome, where he had set up a studio with his brother, Juan, and two other Spaniards from Zaragoza, by 1612. Although we do not know the details of his early education, Ribera prided himself on being a classically trained artist. In Parma and Rome, and perhaps even Venice, Ribera had learnt his art by looking at the masters of the past – Raphael, Michelangelo, Correggio and Titian – as well as by studying the great collections of antique sculptures in Rome. He became a member of Rome's painting academy, the Accademia di San Luca, in 1613, and occasionally signed his pictures with the title 'academicus Romanus'. His understanding of the past would, as we shall see, bring an air of grandeur and nobility of form to his visceral and gruesome representations of the male nude undergoing extreme pain. Indeed, he nostalgically recalls how important the masters of the past were to him when speaking to his friend Martínez in 1625: 'Not only do I wish to see

Detail of Fig. 3.3

3.2
Room 5 of *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600–1700*, National Gallery, London, 2009

Spanish flavour, in spite of Ribera's training in Italy and his dependence on Caravaggio. Although he was only a teenager when he left his hometown, the realism of Spanish polychrome sculpture, for example, with its rituals and celebrated Easter processions, is likely to have made an impression on the young Ribera.

In an exhibition in 2009 at the National Gallery in London, a life-size polychrome sculpture of *Dead Christ* (*c*.1620–25) by Gregorio Fernández was juxtaposed with Ribera's painting of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (early 1620s) (Fig. 3.2).[12] Despite the improbability of either artist knowing of the other's work, the confrontation of the two revealed the extent to which Ribera's compositions were perhaps influenced by sculpture and a powerful figural isolation of the body. With baroque religious sculptures one is encouraged to participate physically, to experience the work of art in three dimensions by walking around it as though part of the same religious drama. In Ribera's *Lamentation*, he too creates a 'tableau vivant' by carefully isolating the figures of the Virgin and Mary Magdalene, who lean over the recumbent white flesh of the dead Christ. Ribera's lack of interest in any narrative detail, and focus instead on the figural, suggests an awareness of the art of Spanish sculpture and the power of this type of religious drama.[13]

Ribera's earliest known version of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Fig. 3.3) is shockingly graphic. Tied to a tree, the saint has been strung up like an animal so that he can be skinned alive by an executioner. The pain must be excruciating but rather than screaming and writhing in agony he submits himself to his sacrifice. He looks up to heaven and his left hand is open as if to signal that he is receiving spiritual aid. Again, no angel or martyr's palm is present. There is no need for symbols or allegory. Although graphic in showing the physical side of martyrdom, the emotional tenor of the painting points to the nobility of human sacrifice. Such an image still has the potential to shock and must have had a great impact on seventeenth-century viewers. Indeed, one of Ribera's biographers recounts how on a certain feast day Ribera displayed a painting of the same subject in the street opposite the Palazzo Reale in Naples, attracting a large crowd.[14] The commotion caused Don Pedro Téllez-Girón, Duke of Osuna, the new viceroy of Naples, who was watching from a balcony, to ask after the artist and have the painter and the painting brought to him. Ribera was to become his artist of choice and produced a series of religious

3.9
Damien Hirst (b. 1965)
Saint Bartholomew, Exquisite Pain, 2006
252 × 108 × 75 cm
Saint Bartholomew the Great, London

Armenia. Enraged by the monarch's conversion, King Polemius' brother, Astyages, ordered Bartholomew's torture and execution. A monastery in Armenia today marks the spot of his death, while his relics were believed to have been transported miraculously onto the island of Lipari, off the coast of Sicily, before being transferred in AD 806 to the town of Benevento. A large piece of his skin and bones are housed today in the Basilica of Saint Bartholomew in the city. Because he had been flayed, Saint Bartholomew was commonly known as the patron saint of tanners. The Guild of Tanners, Skinners or Curriers, as they were known, traded in leather and are known to have been present in cities such as Florence since 1197, and were very likely present in Naples as well.[23]

Significantly, the barber surgeons' guild also had close connections with Saint Bartholomew. Another body part of the saint had been given in AD 983 by Otto II, Holy Roman Emperor, to Rome, where it is conserved at the church of San Bartolomeo all'Isola, which was founded on the temple of Asclepius, an important Roman medical centre. This association with medicine over time caused Bartholomew's name to become associated with surgeons and hospitals. The saint's martyrdom makes him look like an *écorché*, an anatomical figure with the skin removed that reveals the location and interplay of the muscles. The legend of Saint Bartholomew was the perfect Christian narrative for the scientifically minded. The connection between the two is explicit in Gaspar Becerra's design of an *écorché*, engraved by Nicolas Beatrizet in Juan Valverde de Hamusco's anatomy book, *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* (1556) (Fig. 3.10, and see Cat. 6). The image shows Saint Bartholomew holding his own skin – note the wilted, bearded face – to reveal the complexities of the human anatomy beneath. This guild, too, is likely to have been present in Naples and, although there are no records to indicate that any of these craft organisations were Ribera's patrons,

3.10
Nicolas Beatrizet (1515–c.1566) after Gaspar Becerra (c.1520–1570)
Detail: *Écorché*, 1556
Etching and engraving, 21.6 × 15.1 cm
From Juan Valverde de Hamusco, *Historia de la composición del cuerpo humano* 1556

the detail with which he describes the cutting of the flesh suggests that this is just the kind of picture that would have appealed to these patrons.

The connection between Saint Bartholomew and science is exemplified in a contemporary work of 2006. In the City of London's parish church of Saint Bartholomew the Great, next door to Saint Bartholomew's hospital, is installed Damien Hirst's life-size sculpture *Saint Bartholomew, Exquisite Pain* (Fig. 3.9). As he explained in an interview, Hirst was educated at a Catholic school where he was exposed to prints and sculptures of Saint Bartholomew. One such sculpture celebrated amongst Catholics is Marco d'Agrate's impressive sculpture of the saint draped in his own skin (1562) in the Duomo in Milan. Hirst's sculpture is inspired by traditional representations of the saint, in which this duality of science and art is explored. His Bartholomew brandishes not only a scalpel, according to traditional

CATALOGUE

Edward Payne

Religious Violence: Saint Bartholomew

Detail of Cat. 1

Of all his images of violent subjects, Ribera's scenes of religious martyrdom are among the most visceral and varied. Martyred saints abound in Ribera's painted and graphic oeuvre, ranging from numerous portrayals of Bartholomew, Sebastian and Andrew, to occasional depictions of Lawrence, Philip and Albert. These protagonists appear either in isolation, bearing the symbols of their martyrdom, or in multi-figured compositions, undergoing extreme torture. Suspending their bodies both physically and temporally, Ribera usually places his saints against a dark background or nondescript setting instead of grounding them in idealised landscapes.

One scholar has recently calculated that 300 of the 364 paintings attributed to Ribera depict religious subjects.[1] Most of these works were commissioned by private patrons for their personal devotions rather than for specific churches or religious institutions.[2] Among the relatively small number of paintings that were conceived for sacred spaces are the canvases for the Carthusian monastery of San Martino in Naples (*The Communion of the Apostles*, *Pietà*, *Prophets*, and *Virgin and Child with Saint Bruno*); *The Immaculate Conception* (Fig. 2.5) and *Pietà* for the Convento de las Agustinas Recoletas in Salamanca; *San Gennaro Emerging Unharmed from the Furnace* for the Cappella del Tesoro di San Gennaro (Fig. 2.4); and *The Trinity on Earth* and *Saint Jerome and the Angel of Judgement* for the Church of the Trinità delle Monache. None of these, curiously, represents an episode of extreme violence.

In certain instances, religious paintings by Ribera ended up in churches through the viceroys who had commissioned them. Such was the case for the elaborate altarpiece of *The Immaculate Conception*, conceived for the burial chapel of the Count of Monterrey in Salamanca. Similarly, Ribera's first viceroy patron in Naples, the Duke of Osuna, commissioned from the artist a series of four saints comprising two martyrs, Bartholomew (Fig. 3.3) and Sebastian, and two penitents, Peter and Jerome, all figures whom Ribera continued to represent throughout his career. Following the duke's death, his widow donated ten paintings to the Collegiate Church of Osuna, including this series and a *Crucifixion* by Ribera which she herself commissioned.[3] The tortured and emaciated bodies of the saints that he so frequently portrayed parallel the Passion of Christ in their emphasis on redemption through pain and suffering. These works were designed to inspire devotion in the spectator through certain visual devices, notably a heightened 'realism' when rendering the body in pain, and the substitution of traditionally idealised figures for un-idealised everyday models with whom the spectator could more easily identify.

The issue of representing saintly martyrdom was of great importance during the Counter-Reformation. In 1563, at the final session of the ecclesiastical conference known as the Council of Trent, the assembled bishops insisted upon re-establishing veneration for the saints. Ribera's visceral depictions of religious violence responded to the call for images that would inspire piety by arousing emotion in the spectator. One of the devices that artists adopted was the suppression of narrative elements in order to sharpen the focus on the saintly body. Ribera's martyrdom scenes address the artistic challenge of depicting narrative episodes within a single composition, and the underlying tensions

1

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, c.1628
Oil on canvas, 145 × 216 cm
Palazzo Pitti, Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence
Inv. Palatina 1912 n. 19

This painting represents the suspended, emaciated figure of Saint Bartholomew. His leathery skin is described with painstaking detail, his unbroken body dramatically illuminated in the centre of the composition. In spite of its horizontal format, the compositional design of the painting directly recalls Ribera's etching of 1624, the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Cat. 3). The leering knife-sharpener at the far right, the priests and soldiers in the distance, and the sculpted head on the ground, all reinforce this connection.

One crucial difference, however, is that the saint is being flayed in the print but not in the painting. Here Ribera has exploded the narrative, scattering different elements of the story across the canvas and thus complicating the legibility of the scene. Preparations for Bartholomew's torture are symbolised by the knife-sharpener and the executioner binding the saint. Bartholomew's imminent flaying is foreshadowed by the executioner's torn garments and the voluminous folds of white drapery at the lower right. The priests and soldiers evoke Bartholomew's capture, while the sculpted head relates simultaneously to his act of destroying pagan idols and his eventual beheading. It also anticipates Ribera's painting of *The Sense of Touch* (Cat. 15), which explores the *paragone* – or competition – between the arts of sculpture and painting, and their associated senses of touch and sight. Moreover, the juxtaposition of the sculpture with the saint underscores the contrast between classicism and naturalism, the flawless antique head and the old male flesh. The overturned bust facing the ground, its eyes veiled in shadow, suggests not only the rejection of classical sculpture in favour of naturalistic painting, but also the blindness of idolatry versus the heavenly light of God at which Bartholomew's gaze is fixed.

Ribera exploits the subject of saintly martyrdom in order to explore the problems of witnessing physical violence and beholding its representation. The word 'martyr', from the ancient Greek *mártus*, witness, refers to someone who testifies to a fact of which he has knowledge from personal observation. In a religious context, the term relates to those who subjected themselves to torture and death for having borne witness to Christ or the Christian faith. One was not made a martyr just for 'seeing', however, but also for speaking or spreading the Word. Paradoxically, in this painting, it is not the saint but his assassins – the executioner and the knife-sharpener – who address the spectator directly. Although their mask-like faces are partially obscured, their provocative gaze into our space coupled with their unsettling expression transform the figures into almost parodic interlocutors, mediating between the fictive space of representation and the actual space of the beholder.

Skin and the Five Senses

Detail of Cat. 14

8
Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Small Grotesque Head, 1622
Etching, 14.2 × 11.1 cm
The British Museum, London
W,6.110

9
Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
*Large Grotesque Head, c.*1622
Etching and engraving, 21.4 × 14 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1917
17.3.1830

Two of Ribera's earliest etchings, the small and large grotesque heads, depict figures suffering from what appears to be scrofula – a disease with glandular swellings, probably a form of tuberculosis – and whose disfigurement Ribera seems to exacerbate by adding extra warts and ballooning the size of the tumours.[22] Likewise, several drawings of head studies by Ribera, executed in various media, reveal a fascination with deformities and physical imperfections that recalls the tradition of grotesque heads exemplified by Leonardo da Vinci. Indeed, Leonardo's sheet of *Five Grotesque Heads* (*c.*1490) has been considered a potential source for Ribera's *Studies of the Nose and Mouth* (Cat. 12).[23] It has also been suggested that Ribera's *Large Grotesque Head* may derive from a plate representing *Olympian Deities* (*c.*1575), formerly ascribed to Martino Rota and recently reattributed to Giovanni Ambrogio Brambilla.[24] Ribera was inspired by these earlier models, yet his grotesque heads are fundamentally *different* from those of his predecessors.[25] Ribera's individualised heads can be set against Leonardo's, which were designed as studies of physiognomic types, rather than portrayals of specific individuals.[26]

The ruff and Phrygian bonnet worn by the man in the *Large Grotesque Head* resemble the accessories of contemporary court jesters, indicating the satire of a particular social type.[27] The stocking cap's crumpled peak rhymes visually with the man's enormous tumours, which were traditionally associated with madness, further contributing to the comic dimension of the image.[28] Indeed, in his life of Ribera, Bernardo De Dominici observes that the artist made some prints of deformed heads as a joke, or for fun.[29]

There is a clear resemblance between the *Small Grotesque Head* and the principal executioner in the Bartholomew etching (Cat. 3), united by their bandannas, rough features and profile poses. This figure is one of Ribera's stock characters, regularly cast in the role of executioner, notably in his paintings of the *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* (Cats. 1 and 2). The 'ugly' appearance of this executioner was noted by the nineteenth-century writer William Bell Scott, who observed that in Ribera's martyrdom scenes, '[u]gliness in the characters represented, as executioners especially, was sometimes exceedingly repulsive, as in the man bringing the wood in the "Martyrdom of St. Laurence", covered with warts and wrinkles'.[30] When viewed in connection with his anatomical studies (Cats. 10–12) which make explicit reference to the five senses, the small and large grotesque heads also suggest a meditation on sensory extremes, specifically the extremes of sight and touch.

12


EL TRIBVNALE
DELLA
VECARIIA

Crime and Punishment

Detail of Cat. 16


Jusepe de Ribera ñol espa
F.

25

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Man Bound to a Stake, first half of the 1640s
Pen and brown ink with wash, 21.5 × 16.3 cm
Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, San Francisco
Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts
1963.24.614

In this drawing, Ribera bridges the gap between official records of torture and artistic representations of violence. Like his *Inquisition Scene* (Cat. 27), this sheet depicts a moment of intense bodily suffering: a naked figure, chained to the post, is slowly strangled by the cord tied around his neck, which becomes tighter as he loses the strength to support his body upright. Ribera has foreshadowed the individual's fate, for the uneven lines in the lower zone of the page signify a wooden pyre that will be ignited. In this period, burning at the stake was a punishment reserved for those who were convicted of sodomy (Cat. 18), heresy, apostasy, sacrilege and witchcraft.

Man Bound to a Stake is the sole sheet representing this type of public execution that survives in the artist's oeuvre. It may be compared to an etching by Jacques Callot from his series *Les misères et les malheurs de la guerre* (1633), which depicts the execution of men condemned to the stake, in the presence of soldiers, for having destroyed the church which has burst into flames in the background (Cat. 22). Whereas Callot's print, with its verse caption explaining the punishment, appears to be moralising in character, Ribera's drawing is independent in nature, its precise function beyond that of visual reportage difficult to determine.[54]

It is curious that Ribera has chosen to sign the drawing: the large, individually formed letters, boldly spelling out his name and nationality, almost rival the bound figure in importance. The prominence of the signature not only confirms the work's authenticity – *Jusepe de Ribera español made this drawing* – but also asserts that the artist may, in fact, have witnessed the event: *Jusepe de Ribera español was here*.

The Bound Figure

Detail of Cat. 37

38

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
A Winged Putto Flogging a Satyr Tied to a Tree, early 1620s
Etching, 17 × 20.8 cm
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1953
53.601.1

Perhaps Ribera's most light-hearted variation on the motif of the bound figure, this print combines themes of violence and eroticism. A satyr, half man, half goat, is here portrayed with his arms bound to a blasted tree trunk. He turns to face a winged putto, who plunges towards him headfirst, menacingly raising a whip, its sharp ends echoing the uneven edges of the tree stump. The subject of the print is the chastisement of animal passion by love, represented by the satyr and Cupid, respectively. Considered one of the stages of the progress of love, the scene was popular with such notable artists as Titian, Veronese and Annibale Carracci.[67] Ribera evidently knew the latter's print from the *Lascivie* series (1590–95), which provocatively inverts the traditional theme by representing a satyr whipping a nymph tied to a tree.

Although its attribution has long been debated, Ribera's print is stylistically and thematically consistent with the artist's hand. Iconographically, it relates to an ink and wash drawing of *Cupid Whipping a Man Tied Upside Down to a Tree* in the Musée Condé, Chantilly, and the image of a chastised satyr resonates closely with Ribera's paintings of Marsyas flayed alive (Cat. 39 and Fig. 4.2).[68]

Mythological Violence: Apollo and Marsyas

Detail of Cat. 39

39

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)
Apollo and Marsyas, 1637
Oil on canvas, 182 × 232 cm
Museo e Real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples
Quintavalle, 511

One of the artist's most complex and arresting paintings, *Apollo and Marsyas* demonstrates Ribera at the height of his creative powers. The painter represents the gruesome fate of Marsyas, who was flayed alive by the god Apollo after losing a musical competition. Ribera transforms the violent event into a visual commentary on the *paragone* or rivalry between the arts of painting and sculpture. Marsyas, depicted in a palette of earthy colours and red in his face, stares out helplessly at the spectator. Apollo, portrayed in a paler tone and marble-like in appearance, his billowing drapery recalling that of a classical sculpture, tears at the satyr's hide with his hands. While at first glance Apollo appears to be completely dominating Marsyas, the circular, wheel-like composition of the two figures suggests unity rather than hierarchy between the arts of sculpture and painting, and their associated senses of touch and sight.

Indeed, Ribera does not seem to be sympathising with one figure over the other, as the composition is equally divided between god and satyr, physically joined by the open wound. Ribera makes a visual play on strings in the painting: adjacent to the strung-up satyr is a stringed instrument – the lyre, which Ribera has modernised into a *viola da braccio* – and suspended from a branch by a loose string is Marsyas' *aulos*. The satyr's recumbent position, which recalls Ribera's drawings of the crucifixion of Saint Peter (Cats. 28–30), has led one scholar to interpret Apollo as not merely flaying, but also *playing* Marsyas.[73] The painting thus becomes a re-enactment of the competition: Apollo flays Marsyas upside down, as he had vanquished the satyr by playing the lyre upside down.

When treating this subject in paint, Ribera explores the material qualities of skin by associating it with different textures. Apollo, whose cloak envelops him like a second skin, seems to be flaying at once the hide of the satyr and the bark of the tree, as the two appear to merge into one. This section of the painting has certainly darkened over time, thereby heightening the ambiguity between hide and bark. The prominence given to the open wound nevertheless reveals the artist's preoccupation with the act of skinning the surface. Ribera elicits another visual pun, for the verb 'to flay' in Italian, *scorticare*, derives from the Latin *cortex*, meaning bark. *Scorticare* resembles *scortecciare*, a verb with the same Latin origin, which refers specifically to the peeling of bark from a tree. The connection between flayed bark and flayed skin is further emphasised by the blasted branch at the far left, whose end Apollo seems to have used to sharpen his knife.

Marsyas' skin may also be read as a metaphor for the canvas, while Apollo's process of flaying is at once destructive and creative. By penetrating the body of the satyr and making visible what lies beneath, Apollo takes on the role of a painter: according to seventeenth-century art theory, the painter's mission was to give tangible form to the *affetti*, or emotions, by arousing the passions of the soul. Moreover, the split in Marsyas' canvas-skin turns the painting into a commentary on the medium of painting itself, as it underscores the proximity between the refinement of the painted surface and the rawness of its reverse. The raw and the refined relate to the Dionysian and the Apollonian conception of the arts, namely the contrast between emotion and reason, creativity and rationality. This opposition is here personified by the bodies of Marsyas and Apollo, and articulated through the violent act of splitting, ripping and wounding the body of Marsyas. Above all, Ribera's portrayal of Apollo and Marsyas is about the processes of 'making' and 'unmaking'.[74] Operating as a self-conscious artificer, the artist has turned skin from a passive object into an active subject, transforming it into a surface at once bodily and pictorial, penetrated by both the hands and eyes.

The intensity of Marsyas' shrieks can be measured not only by his tormented expression, but also by the reaction of the figures in the background.