

RIBERA: ART OF VIOLENCE, DULWICH PICTURE GALLERY - IN PICTURES



REVIEW

***Ribera - Art of Violence* review: Gory details exude raw power and beauty**

Reviewed by **BEN LUKE**

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The paintings that open this show depict the Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, who was flayed alive. How powerfully the Baroque master Jusepe de Ribera (1591-1652) captures his anguish. In one, Bartholomew is tied at his feet by one executioner, while another sharpens the knives that will slice his skin.

Both executioners look at the viewer, the knife-sharpener with particular glee. Bartholomew, meanwhile, looks to the heavens.

In the other picture, the flaying is vivid; another leering executioner cuts Bartholomew's skin away, revealing crimson flesh beneath. This time, Bartholomew meets our gaze, plaintively imploring us to feel his pain.

Lord Byron later wrote of how Ribera "tainted/His brush with all the blood of all the sainted". A myth developed that Ribera, the maker of such violent images, must have been violent himself. There's little evidence to suggest this, and this show and its catalogue explain his work as a consequence of the social and artistic culture of the time.

Born near Valencia, he was in Rome as a teenager, and had settled in Naples, then a Spanish territory, by 1616. He soon gained the patronage of the city's viceroys and remained there for the rest of his life.

He was influenced, like so many, by Caravaggio, whose dramatic theatrical chiaroscuro he adopted. Also crucial was the Counter Reformation, the Catholic church's fightback against Protestantism, which called for devotional images of fervent emotion.

Ribera achieves that poignancy through realism: saints and gods are living, breathing people. Saint Sebastian isn't the classical, ripped hunk pierced with arrows of other painters. He's prostrate, bound and pained, while holy women attend to his wounds.



Exhibition on shocking Spanish artist features 19th century human skin

Real life was gruesome then: among many exquisite drawings are Ribera's studies of torture — including two of the *strappado*, where victims were hung by their arms, which would dislocate. A painting here, not by Ribera, shows a Neapolitan square in which a strappado dangles casually over the bustle.

Ribera caught reality in explicit sensory detail — studies of ears, noses and gaping mouths show how attentively. One of the mouths appears in paint, on the face of the hubristic satyr Marsyas, in another picture of flaying, in the dramatic final room. Marsyas challenged the god Apollo to a musical duel and lost; Ribera's depiction of his fate is, inevitably, gruesome yet glorious.

Until Jan 27 (020 8693 5254, dulwichpicturegallery.org.uk)