

FIRST NIGHT

## Exhibition review: Ribera — Art of Violence at Dulwich Picture Gallery

The work of the Spanish baroque master is arresting not only for its painterly brilliance, but also for its visceral depiction of human suffering

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The final room in this atmospheric show houses one painting, Jusepe de Ribera's *Apollo and Marsias*. '3859  
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The skin tingles from the start of this powerful exhibition. Dark-grey walls, spotlighting and a judiciously spare hang of eight of the Spanish baroque master Jusepe de Ribera's vivid paintings — there are also drawings, prints and a piece of tattooed human skin — make for an atmospheric show, but it's those paintings that make the hair on the back of your neck stand up.

Ribera is considered an heir to Caravaggio for his use of dramatic chiaroscuro and unidealised live models. His work is arresting not only for its painterly brilliance, but also for its visceral depiction of human suffering (more perhaps than is strictly healthy, Ribera exhibits a fascination with the painfully contorted male body). This exhibition focuses on his images of violence, with a particular emphasis on the exquisitely horrible torture of flaying alive.



*Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew*, 1644. Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona

The show is bookended by two famously flayed figures, Saint Bartholomew — one of Ribera's favourite subjects — and the satyr Marsyas. In two large canvases in the first room,

Bartholomew's nakedness stretches out, isolated in the earlier picture by holy light as if in slow-motion close-up, as his torturers enthusiastically bind him and sharpen the knife that will be used, in the later painting, to peel back the skin, arm first. The 1628 *Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew* is breathtaking; the aged, but still reasonably buff saint's sagging skin pools and creases in a virtuoso display of the painter's skill. In the 1644 depiction of the same subject, the paring of the flesh is almost less upsetting than the saint's face; his bloodshot eyes meet the viewer's, leaving you with a squirming feeling of culpability.

Works on paper of bound figures and contorted Saint Sebastians show not only Ribera's superb draughtsmanship, but also his keen interest in the process of torture, the logistical nitty-gritty of it. As the curators point out, in Ribera's era public violence — torture and execution — was commonplace; our squeamishness is recently learnt. Ribera's executioners concentrate on their tasks and, in the case of those trying to figure out how to crucify Saint Peter upside down, at his request, grumble.

Each twisted spine or dislocated arm induces a wince, but in an inspired bit of excruciating showmanship the curators don't let you off with that. The final room houses one painting, depicting the moment when Apollo, who has inevitably won the musical challenge put to him by Marsyas, begins flaying him for his hubris. The beautiful god, casual in cruelty, contrasts with the shrieking victim. Marsyas's muscles tense, his neck flushes. His eyes, again, seek out yours — and your skin crawls.

**To January 27, 2019**