The Telegraph

Ribera: Art of Violence, Dulwich Picture Gallery

Physical agony laid bare, this exhibition is compelling – but traumatising

Jusepe de Ribera's *Saint Sebastian Tended by the Holy Women*, Museo de Bellas Artes, Bilbao

Alastair Sooke, CRITIC AT LARGE

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Those accustomed to a certain sort of show at Dulwich Picture Gallery –cosy, respectable, polite – are in for a shock.

A fortnight ago, the gallery was still celebrating the quirky, quiet genius of 20th-century English artist Edward Bawden, in an exhibition full of watercolours and designs for wallpaper.

Now comes Ribera: Art of Violence, the first ever British exhibition devoted to the 17th-century Spaniard Jusepe de Ribera – and, believe me, visitors will need to be made of sterner stuff.

Executions. Public torture. Upside-down crucifixions. Naked victims bound to the stake. Picture after grisly picture of saints or satyrs being flayed alive, their skin slowly, and excruciatingly, peeled back, to reveal quivering crimson flesh beneath.

Honestly, the bloodcurdling images in this exhibition are enough to give anyone nightmares: I feel traumatised just describing them. Ribera produced hard-core art that will make you shudder and flinch.

And yet, despite all the savagery and gore, his best works have, perversely, a strange beauty, which, once recognised, is unforgettable.

Ribera was born in Valencia in 1591, but, after a stint in Rome, where he was classically trained, he fetched up in Naples – then, as now, a tumultuous, volatile city, overlooked by Mount Vesuvius.

Jusepe de Ribera's *Apollo and Marsyas*, Museo di Capodimonte, Naples

In Italy, he fashioned a successful career, capitalising upon the vogue for shocking realism that Caravaggio had ushered in, and winning patronage from viceroys, patricians, and wealthy merchants.

Indeed, he was so successful that, despite earning the nickname “lo Spagnoletto” (the little Spaniard), he did not return to his homeland, observing that “Spain is a merciful mother to foreigners but a most cruel stepmother to her own”.

Like his compatriot and near-contemporary Murillo, Ribera could paint “nice”: he, too, was perfectly capable of a sweet Immaculate Conception, full of fluttering angels and cherubs. His gorgeous Mary Magdalene, swathed in rich red silk, hangs in the Prado. Yet, principally, Ribera is known for his violent, visceral martyrdoms and mythological scenes evoking suffering and pain.

According to one 17th-century writer, Ribera’s series of four paintings representing infamous sinners from ancient Greek mythology was so extreme that, after seeing one that depicted Ixion bound to a fiery wheel, the Greek legend’s fingers “crisped with pain”, the wife of a Dutch collector gave birth to a child with deformed hands.

The moral of the story? Beware the terrible black magic of Ribera’s powerful art.

Of course, it’s tempting to assume that any artist who chose, as Ribera did in 1632, to paint a vulture sucking long, cord-like entrails from the flank of the writhing, manacled Greek giant Tityus, must have been an irredeemably vile sadist.

There are even (unsubstantiated) rumours that Ribera poisoned his Bolognese rival Domenichino. At Dulwich, several drawings of bound, naked men with supple musculature suggest sadomasochistic tendencies.

Yet the curators of this self-contained, even sparse exhibition discourage the voyeuristic, caricature-risking impulse to speculate about Ribera’s biography. Instead, Edward Payne and Xavier Bray (who is now director of the Wallace Collection, but used to be Dulwich’s chief curator) remind us of Ribera’s pride in his academic training, and point out that, towards the end of his life, he was described by Neapolitan monks as “a pious person”.

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

Moreover, they situate Ribera's art in the bloodthirsty social context of 17th-century Europe, as well as contemporary aesthetic debates concerning the merits of classicism versus naturalism.

This is the lesson of the opening gallery, which contains two versions by Ribera, separated by 16 years, of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, who was flayed alive.

In both paintings, Ribera contrasts Bartholomew's wrinkled, leathery skin with folds of smooth drapery that prefigure his flayed epidermis. He also turns Bartholomew's coarse-faced executioners, wearing sweat-soaked bandanas and tattered tunics, into memorable characters.

The later painting, from Barcelona, is a compositional marvel. The prone saint's limbs push outwards, almost touching the edges of the canvas, emphasising the claustrophobic intensity of his experience. Yet he appears strangely self-composed amid the tumult of his appalling crisis, staring straight at the viewer as one butcher-like torturer plunges a fist into his arm.

No doubt, the painting responded to the Church's injunction to Baroque artists to inspire religiosity by stirring up heated emotions. But it is evident, too, that Ribera was reflecting the violence of his times: as a later gallery makes clear, public executions and ritualised torture by the Inquisition passed for entertainment in those days.

Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, 1624, Etching with engraving, The New York Public Library

Two seemingly on-the-spot drawings by Ribera record a hapless offender enduring a violent form of torture known, in Italian, as “lo strappado”. This involved being hoisted up by the wrists, which were bound behind the back, until the shoulders dislocated.

Elsewhere, we find a marble head of Apollo, on loan from the British Museum, which resembles the fragmentary, decapitated bust of the Greek god that Ribera includes in both Bartholomew pictures. What is the significance of this detail?

Surely, it refers to the pagan idols shattered by Bartholomew. But it also alludes to the Apollo Belvedere, a celebrated ancient marble sculpture that Ribera would have seen in Rome.

Thus, his paintings of Saint Bartholomew dramatise the triumph of his own raw brand of Caravaggesque realism over the classical tradition, represented by the discarded head of Apollo.

Things become even more complex in the dramatic final gallery, which presents an astonishing canvas from 1637, almost cinematic in its effect (think Tarantino), in which Apollo flays alive the satyr Marsyas, as brutal punishment for having lost a musical competition between them.

With his billowing cloak echoing the pink-tinged clouds behind him, Apollo, the sky god, gazes down almost tenderly at his victim, while softly probing a gaping and unmistakably vaginal wound on the satyr’s hairy leg, as though “playing” Marsyas’s body as if it were the lyre on which he has just demonstrated his musical supremacy.

Meanwhile, Marsyas, red-faced and upside-down, tethered to a blasted tree, roars with pain, his screaming mouth foreshadowing one of Francis Bacon’s stricken popes.

It is a ferocious vision: weird, nightmarish, unbearable. And yet, with its allusions to music-making and creativity (Apollo was god of the arts, after all), it also feels, somehow, primal and fundamental: a mysterious meditation, perhaps, on the mechanisms of art itself, which, if it is any good, must combine civilised refinement, embodied by Apollo, with Marsyas's earthy rawness. Amid the horror, Ribera could discern a rare glimpse of beauty; so much so, that he painted the subject more than once.

Like I said, then: this is dark and difficult art, produced during a dark and difficult era. But it is also uniformly compelling, with an awareness of brutality and anguish that still resonates today.

At Dulwich Picture Gallery from Sept 26 until Jan 27