

This 16-century Spanish sculptor changed how his country looked at religious art

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"Ecce Homo," a statue of Jesus Christ, greets visitors to the "Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain" exhibition at the National Gallery of Art. (Robert Shelley/National Gallery of Art)

Visitors to the National Gallery of Art's Alonso Berruguete exhibition first encounter a sculpture of Christ, with a red robe sliding off his emaciated body, a rope around his neck, his eyes downcast and body glistening, as if made from polished bone. The work, executed around 1524, is "Ecce Homo," Latin for "behold the man," a common subject in Christian art that depicts Christ after being beaten and mocked with a crown of thorns.

But it is the arms of Christ that are most striking. They seem to be resting on a column, but there is no column there, just the robe and rope which flow down from his neck and shoulders to the base of the sculpture. His body is beaten down, but he seems to cradle something in his floating arms, perhaps his dignity, his sense of self or his spirit, magically suspended, as if weightless.

Berruguete isn't well known in this country. The National Gallery of Art exhibition devoted to the artist is billed as the first outside of his native Spain. His sculpture, hyperemotional and vividly colored, is challenging, especially to modern sensibilities more accustomed to the blank whiteness of marble, or the monochrome luster of bronze. The figures he depicts feel theatrical, straining for maximum emotional impact, their bodies speaking with the exaggerated cadence and clarity of a practiced orator, not the familiar inflections of ordinary people.

Compared with other depictions of Ecce Homo, made by artists in Spain around the same time, Berruguete's Christ is also miraculously unscathed by the gruesome gashes and wounds, highlighted with red paint, that were commonly used to depict the suffering savior. His emotional intensity is built up from the gestures and proportions of the body, from the psychology immanent in posture and the position of his limbs, hands, feet and even toes. Berruguete's Christ communicates through his body like a dancer, while other Christs of the period wore their wounds on the skin like a uniform.



"Ecce Homo" (c. 1524) by Alonso Berruguete. Painted wood with gilding.
(Alonso Berruguete/Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid)

The Berruguete exhibition is relatively small, with fewer than 50 works, but it documents an important episode in Renaissance art, a moment of cultural transfer from Italy to Spain, the former rich in art and humanism, the latter a nascent colonial power on the cusp of a golden age of art and literature. Berruguete was a critical link in this exchange. Born into a low-ranking family of nobility and the son of a distinguished painter, Berruguete went on to be enormously successful and relatively rich, working as a painter to the king before he turned to the design and manufacture of retablos, the ornate altarpieces that were the visual main event of Spanish churches.

His ambition and curiosity inspired him to spend at least a decade in Italy as a young artist, where he succeeded in attracting significant attention. In 1506, around the time he traveled there, one of the most famous sculptures of antiquity, the "Laocoon," was excavated from a vineyard in Rome. It's depiction of a Trojan priest and his two sons attacked by snakes galvanized Renaissance artists, who superimposed its dynamic choreography of death and physical agony onto Christian subjects.

Berruguete was recorded as a participant in a famous competition to produce a wax facsimile of the statue. And he was mentioned in letters by Michelangelo, who gave the young artist permission to study his prized drawing of the Battle of Cascina and thought well enough of the "young Spaniard" to ask after his health. Encounters with both works — the Laocoon sculptural group and the Battle of Cascina (which became a universal catalogue of male sculptural poses and physical contortions) — had a deep impact on the young artist. So, too, the architectural insights he gleaned from Italy, which was reconfiguring the ancient vocabulary of rounded arches, classical columns and fierce symmetry for a new age.

There are mysteries to his life. He doesn't seem to have been a sculptor before he returned to Spain, notwithstanding his attempt to reproduce the Laocoon in wax. Nor do we know for sure what he actually sculpted and what was produced by artisans in his workshop. The scholarly assumption — tenuous but reasonable — is that the best works from his studio probably were by him or with significant contributions from him.

He was an artist born into one age and milieu — Spain under the influence of an elegant, late Gothic art — who was transformed by direct engagement with some of the greatest minds of the high Renaissance, only to return to Spain in 1518 to run a creative enterprise that was fundamentally collaborative. He probably turned to making retablos because it was more lucrative than painting.

Retablos not only required an array of creative contributions, from architectural design to gilding, sculpting and coloring the figures, but they bore a compendium of messages. They told a range of religious stories, incorporated myriad figures and built their visual authority through accumulation and excess. They were what we might call immersive experiences, overwhelming the eyes and flooding the mind.



"Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain" runs through Feb. 17, 2020. (Robert Shelley/National Gallery of Art)

Many of the central pieces in the National Gallery exhibition are taken from a retablo that was disassembled in the 19th century. Originally, it featured a scalloped half dome surmounting a facade of niches, full of carvings and paintings, arrayed in horizontal bands along two floors or levels. Sculpture made for this kind of display weren't necessarily finished on all sides, so seeing Berruguete's art at eye level, in the round, doesn't give one a sense of its impact in its original setting (though the gallery has constructed a wall of niches to display some of the pieces closer to how they were meant to be seen).

One sees the response to Michelangelo in works such as "The Sacrifice of Isaac," in which the bound and kneeling young man is clearly derived from a figure in the Sistine chapel. A painted panel of Saint Matthew and Berruguete's fine drawings further underscore the debt. But in the artist's most distinctive work his own particular, Spanish sensibility overpowers any direct sense of stylistic influence. The bodies may move like those of Michelangelo, but their proportions are elongated and their curious blend of elegance and overt suffering seems more indebted to Donatello.



The "Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain" has fewer than 50 works. (Robert Shelley/National Gallery of Art)

Berruguete died in 1561, more than 15 years before a Greek artist who had been working in Venice and Rome arrived in Toledo, Spain. But it's impossible to look at the paintings of El Greco and not see the inspiration of Berruguete.

At the Prado in Madrid, a 19th-century painting captures some of Berruguete's legacy and the mythology that surrounds him. The invented episode shows a prominent cardinal, seated in Berruguete's gallery or studio, looking at one of the artist's most renowned works, a voluptuous St. Sebastian bound to a gilded tree trunk, pocked by arrow wounds. This piece, unfortunately, isn't in the exhibition, but it is typical of others that are. It is enormously appealing and discomfiting at the same time. Everything about it is urgent, anguished, insistent and seductive, while the cardinal looks on it with the slightly jaded, bored countenance of a veteran shopper. Berruguete himself presents it to the prelate.

Artists of his day, especially those working for the Church, were, of course, salesmen, not just the everyday sort who had to manage a studio and make a living, but salesmen of ideology. Berruguete was enormously good at it, and he specialized in a local adaptation of Renaissance art that was designed to appeal in a visceral, irresistible way.



"The Sacrifice of Isaac" (1526/1533) by Alonso Berruguete. Painted wood with gilding. (Alonso Berruguete/Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid)

Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain Through Feb. 17 at the National Gallery of Art. [nga.gov](https://www.nga.gov).

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