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ART REVIEW

‘Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain’ Review: A Taste of Spain

Embodying the ideas that flourished in Renaissance Italy, Alonso Berruguete became a sort of Iberian Michelangelo.

Alonso Berruguete’s ‘Calvary Group: Crucified Christ Flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist’ (1526/33) from the retablo mayor of San Benito el Real, top PHOTO: MUSEO NACIONAL DE ESCULTURA, VALLADOLID, SPAIN

Eric Gibson 14 de enero de 2020

Washington

We generally associate the word “Renaissance” with art produced in Italy from roughly the 15th through 16th centuries. But the ideas that flowered there spread far and wide —including to Spain, where their greatest exponent was Alonso Berruguete, an electrifying sculptor now the subject of a small show at the National Gallery of Art.

Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain
National Gallery of Art
Through Feb. 17

Organized by C.D. Dickerson III of the National Gallery, Mark McDonald of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Wendy Sepponen of the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University, where it travels after closing in Washington, "Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain" brings together about three dozen works in all media, along with about a dozen more works by other artists for context, including his painter father, Pedro.

This is the first National Gallery show exclusively devoted to so-called Golden Age Spanish sculpture, and one's reaction after taking in its rich polychromy, emotional intensity and ability to engage with the viewer in a way that makes all other European sculpture of the period seem diffident or aloof is to say: More, please.

Berruguete (c. 1488-1561) started life as a painter. Around 1506 he traveled to Italy, where he would spend about a decade, first in Rome, then Florence. Winds of stylistic change were blowing through Spanish art, with the influence of Northern European painters such as Rogier van der Weyden beginning to be displaced by that of Florentines like Domenico Ghirlandaio, and he wanted to go to the source.

In Italy, Berruguete was particularly influenced by Michelangelo, whom he met. This translated into specific borrowings—the crouching figure of Isaac in "The Sacrifice of Isaac" (1526/33) here closely resembles one of the *ignudi* on the Sistine Ceiling—but, more broadly, a conception of the human figure as a dynamically expressive entity. This made for a different kind of Spanish sculpture, one whose emotional impact was rooted in pose, gesture and facial expression rather than sanguinary hyperrealism.

Berruguete is in many ways a curious figure. There is the stark dichotomy between the robust emotionalism of his sculpture and the cloying sentimentality of his paintings, one of which is on view here. Then there is the fact of his slow start. Sculptors of Berruguete's caliber usually discern their métier early, going on to produce important, even breakthrough work by their late 20s or early 30s. By contrast Berruguete, well, took his time, beginning to model figures while in Italy but not producing his first truly major work until his late 30s or early 40s, the retablo mayor, or high altar made of carved, painted and decorated wood, of San Benito el Real (1526/33) in Valladolid. It was worth the wait; San Benito is his masterpiece.

Alonso Berruguete's 'The Sacrifice of Isaac' (1526/33) PHOTO: MUSEO NACIONAL DE ESCULTURA, VALLADOLID

On display is the Crucifixion scene from its top: Christ on the Cross flanked by the Virgin Mary and St. John the Evangelist. To be visible from the distance at which it would have been seen, Berruguete had to exaggerate the twist of the body, but up close it looks as if a charge of electricity has just shot through it. In the flanking figures, the emotions engendered by the spectacle are communicated by the churn of monumental draperies reminiscent of those worn by the Prophets on the Sistine Ceiling.

Alonso Berruguete's 'Salome' (c. 1514-17) PHOTO: GALLERIE DEGLI UFFIZI, FLORENCE

But it is "The Sacrifice of Isaac," from the same retablo, that dominates the exhibition. Italian representations of this subject commonly showed a stoic Abraham, knife poised to strike his son, with the staying hand of an arriving angel visible in the background to telegraph the story's happy outcome. Not here. Berruguete reimagines this subject in a much darker hue. There is neither an angel nor stoicism. Instead, Abraham is gripped by a cyclone of grief and anguish. His right hand clenches the (now missing) knife, but the arm hangs slackly at his side, unable to lift and act. His head is thrown back, his eyes are fixed heavenward and his mouth gapes open as if emitting a cry to God. Berruguete here has turbocharged the monumentality and restraint of Michelangelo and Renaissance classicism generally into something newly and more violently expressive. Such is the power of this work that my recollection after seeing it for the first time in the early 1990s was that it was life-size. Imagine my surprise, on this viewing, to find it is only about three feet tall.

Because the bulk of Berruguete's work is *in situ* in churches in Spain or otherwise impossible to move, this show is at best a sampler. I suspect the only reason it was possible was because the San Benito retablo was transferred to Valladolid's National Sculpture Museum in the 19th century and exists today as a partial reconstruction, making it, to some extent, a movable feast.

This means that the catalog, which illustrates his other work, is an indispensable part of the exhibition. But be warned: After looking at the pictures you are likely to feel your fingers itching to arrange a marriage with your passport.

—Mr. Gibson is the Journal's Arts in Review editor.