

BOOK REVIEWS

Ribera: Art of Violence. By Edward Payne and Xavier Bray. Published in association with the exhibition *Ribera: Art of Violence*, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, 26 September 2018–27 January 2019. Madrid: D. Giles Limited in association with CEEH and the Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2018. 156 pp + 82 colour illustrations. £11.95 (paperback). ISBN 9781898519423.

This catalogue is the first publication to explore the theme of violence in the art of Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652). He has long been celebrated for his depictions of human suffering: flayed skin, pierced flesh, and bound bodies. ‘You, cruel Ribera, harsher than Jupiter [...] you make flow in streams of blood, by way of horrible cuts, cascades of intestines’, wrote Théophile Gautier (1811–72) in a sonnet to Ribera’s tormented giant Tityus (1632, Museo Nacional del Prado), which so horrified the patron when his wife allegedly gave birth to a deformed child after seeing the painting that it was quickly sold.

Gautier raises the point which spectators may feel on seeing these particular pieces: is there a place for violence in art? Ribera, also well known for his lyrical portraits and images depicting reflective philosophers, seems to have revelled in a degree of violence comparable only to Caravaggio (1571–1610) and Goya (1746–1828). The rarity of such a visual language of pain has prompted centuries of spectators since Ribera’s death to suppose he was himself of a sadistic nature and his repertoire of ruthless torturers, tormentors, and executioners, matched only by the pathos and despair of their victims, became a mix of personal indulgence and pure aesthetic experiment.

In fact, as the writers of this unique publication tell us, there is a more complex engagement at work here. Ribera may have been aware he was challenging the sensibilities of his admirers but experiencing such images, after the initial shock of discerning what is actually taking place in these paintings, drawings, and prints, is beyond the immediacy of modern war photography or atrocity archives.

Consisting of five thematic sections — *Religious Violence, Skin and the Five Senses; Crime and Punishment; The Bound Figure; Mythological Violence* — both exhibition and catalogue introduce us to a world in which torturers and victims play out grotesque acts of assault and degradation. What death does, especially violent death, and the way the body changes after death, may fascinate the morbidly curious but few of Ribera’s victims are dead. With this artist it is all about process and he is extremely familiar with the processes of pain. One memorable item in this unusual exhibition is the burning alive of Andrea Pacini, condemned for sodomy, whose execution was recorded on a sheet of memoranda for the *Tribunale Criminale dei Senatore* on 10 May 1614. The account shows thumbnail sketches in the margin. From this an anonymous artist translated the event into a more elegant incineration in which the horror of the moment is deflected by the victim’s nude body amid decorative flames. Below, on the same sheet, Pacini’s lover Camilo de Iacopo di Vicovaro forms an abject victim, forced to watch the immolation while being flogged and branded. Ribera’s work of 1647, *San Gennaro Emerging Unharmful from the Furnace* in the Capella del Tesoro di San Gennaro in the Naples Duomo, offers the kind of miracle which the artist contradicts in private drawings. Unlike the professional draughtsman recording church and state-commissioned killings, or the martyr miraculously preserved from injury, Ribera’s victims in unimaginable pain remain monumental in the more intimate media of chalk, ink, and wash. One sketch goes far beyond the translation of the actual killing into the cursory language of

on-the-spot reporting, and yet remains among the most arresting of these images. *Man bound to a stake* from the early 1640s (item 25, San Francisco Fine Arts Museum) shows how far and how intensely the artist had developed his researches into the details of physical suffering.


Modern research on violence concentrates on motives as well as methods. Killings and torture may be drug-related, for financial gain, or sexual pleasure but the aim is to objectify and dehumanise the victims, through terror, punishment, and the desire to make them suffer. Ribera is less interested in motive but obsessed with method. His victims are rarely abject; the punishment of a miscreant undergoing the *strappado* soils himself (item 26, *Interrogation scene*, late 1620s, Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum). Edward Payne writes tellingly: 'the inquisitor wants a confession and all he gets is excrement.'

Here there are few violent murderers or psychopaths, apart from the odd grinning witness or assistant enjoying the spectacle of St Barnabas being flayed alive as a form of pornography. Flaying occupies a major part of both exhibition and catalogue. Interspersed with antique allusions, *The Flaying of Marsyas* shows how the skin itself becomes part of Ribera's unique skill in painting gradations of tone and shadow (item 39, 1637, Museo e real Bosco di Capodimonte, Naples). If Marsyas is supposed to be dehumanized by the god Apollo as vengeance for mortal presumption, Ribera's lasting obsession with this theme produces images that offer a sub-narrative turning a torso into a work of art, and the almost-dead become full on connective tissue with rancid flesh and abraded skin still retaining bodily reactions while the victim remains breathing.

Cruel and unusual punishment inflicted by the powerful on the helpless, deviant, or subversive anonymized victims, creates a strange body art. Marsyas being skinned alive brings us to one of the more disturbing exhibits, a piece of human skin probably cut from an executed victim and tattooed appropriately with skeleton and scythe. With the rise of the history of body art as an academic discipline it is productive to learn that this particular object, displayed in its glass case, represents a talent that has been around long before Ribera began to study the effects of cutting skin from living bodies, and embraced the challenge of making people undergoing torture look beautiful, even alluring. In his studies of separate features, especially the eyes, which watch furtively from the bold sweep of shadow under the brow bone, Ribera becomes the all-seeing witness who records the many ways people can torment each other, from murder to martyrdom to ritualized slaughter.

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