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The Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland

In October 2021 the only museum in Britain devoted to Spanish art opened in Bishop Auckland, County Durham. Part of the Auckland Project, which uses art, faith and heritage to fuel long-term regeneration, the museum offers an impressive if idiosyncratic representation of Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

by ISABELLE KENT

WHEN SEEN FROM across the market square in Bishop Auckland, County Durham, the new Spanish Gallery appears rather unassuming. A small modern entrance marks the only visible addition to the Victorian bank and schoolhouse that have been combined to create the museum.

Yet behind this modest façade is the most extensive and eclectic collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spanish art in Britain. One hundred and twelve paintings by El Greco, Diego Velázquez, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Luca Giordano and dozens of lesser-known artists are presented across four floors. But how did a museum dedicated to the Golden Age of Spanish art come to open in this economically depressed post-industrial town? And, more importantly, why?

In September 1851 the hispanophile and travel writer Richard Ford went for a jaunt through County Durham. He wrote to his friend William Stirling Maxwell, a great scholar-collector of Spanish art, of 'finding a dozen or so full length Zurbaráns *Joseph and his brethren* at Bishops Aukland [sic] in the Palace of the Episcopos'. The letter ends: 'What treasures are hid in England!'¹ In 2010 the Church of England attempted to sell at auction the 'treasures' that Ford had so admired, a set of life-size depictions of Jacob and his twelve sons – founders of the twelve tribes of Israel – by Francisco de Zurbarán (the painting of *Benjamin* is an eighteenth-century copy). They had been displayed in the dining room of Auckland Castle since 1756, the year they were bought by the Bishop of Durham, Richard Trevor (1707–71).² This rather unlikely acquisition was not merely that of a trendsetting collector – it would be another century before Zurbarán's name became widely known in Britain – it was also a political act, a statement of Trevor's support for Jewish people in England. Three years earlier, in 1753, he had steered a bill through parliament to naturalise the Jewish population. Although the statute was repealed a year later following antisemitic protest, its legacy

1. *The Copatronazgo*, by Juan Bautista Maíno. c.1627. Oil on canvas, 145 by 103 cm. (Courtesy Jonathan Ruffer).

lived on in the purchase of Zurbarán's paintings of the Patriarchs. The attempted sale in 2010 rightly caused a public outcry and was halted only when the financier Jonathan Ruffer stepped in to purchase the paintings on behalf of a trust, together with the palace in which they hang. This acquisition was the impetus behind the creation of a bold new museum of Spanish art.

The Spanish Gallery is not purely, or even primarily, an academic endeavour. Although recent decades have seen a positive shift in arts funding to the north of England, resulting in Liverpool and Manchester emerging as major cultural centres and Hull becoming the United Kingdom City of Culture in 2017, the north-east has benefited little from this trend. The Spanish Gallery is one part of a campaign of cultural and economic regeneration under the banner of the 'Auckland Project', which is intended to turn the former mining town into a centre for tourism and the arts. Among the initiatives of the Project, founded and largely funded by Ruffer, is the restoration and opening of Auckland Castle, which had been a residence of the Bishops of Durham since the twelfth century. A medieval palace with, as Nikolaus Pevnsner called it, a 'vener' of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gothic, its interiors include a beautiful twelfth-century hall, now the chapel, and the Long Dining Room, remodelled by Bishop Trevor with additions by James Wyatt, which still houses *Jacob and his twelve sons* (Fig.2).³ There are also two new buildings by the Irish architect Niall McLaughlin – a striking, sandstone-clad Museum of Faith (projected to open later this year) and a visitor's centre with a timber viewing tower reminiscent both of an ancient siege-weapon and, appropriately for a mining town, if perhaps unintentionally, a colliery pit-head – and a Museum of Mining (not visited by this reviewer). Other initiatives include public gardens, community centres and live performances. The Auckland Project's scale,

For information about visiting The Spanish Gallery, Market Place, Bishop Auckland DL14 7NJ, visit <https://aucklandproject.org/venues/spanish-gallery/>, accessed 8th February 2022.

1 Richard Ford to William Stirling Maxwell, 22nd September 1851, in H. Brigstocke: 'British travellers in Spain, 1766–1849', *The Walpole Society* 77 (2015), p.451.

2 See S.G. Galassi, E. Payne and M. Rolgán, eds: exh. cat. *Zurbarán and his Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle*, Dallas (Meadows Museum), New York (Frick Collection) and Jerusalem

(Israel Museum) 2017–18.
3 M. Roberts, N. Pevsner and E. Williamson: *The Buildings of England: County Durham*, New Haven and London 2021, p.129.



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ambition and execution are admirable and one hopes that it will have a sustained, positive effect for the community.⁴

As both key backer and self-appointed curator, Ruffer's vision has directed not only the display in the Spanish Gallery but also its interpretation. He has received substantial media attention, and for good reason; Ruffer's dedication to Spanish art, which grew from the purchase of Zurbarán's paintings, is strongly connected to his evangelical Christian faith. Accordingly, his interest lies less in the purely historical aspects of the subject or in connoisseurship, but rather in storytelling and, like all the best sermons, his stories aspire to a spiritual, moral and emotional message. Ruffer's vision of Spanish art is as a 'split sensation: the desire for the eternal and the terrible transience, which always, always, undercuts the nobility of this hope'.⁵ His dichotomy between transience and eternity suffuses the display, from the ground-floor room 'Cabbages and Kings' (Fig.3), where Habsburg portraits by the likes of Peter Paul Rubens and Alonso Sánchez Coello are hung opposite still lifes of rotting fruit by such artists as Francisco Barranco and Juan de Arellano, to the top floor, dedicated to facsimiles of Renaissance tombs and memento mori. The museum is fixated on evoking a 'sensation' of the Spanish Golden Age rather than outlining its history. It is an audacious approach and to achieve it Ruffer has gathered together some fine paintings, accompanied by elaborate wall texts that are imbued with his religious faith.

The exhibition opens with Zurbarán's original *Benjamin* (Fig.4), the only painting of the series that Bishop Trevor failed to acquire. The return of this prodigal son, on loan from Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire, cements the institution's core aim, to contextualise the Zurbarán series. There then follows a space devoted to Seville as the gateway to the New World. Here, as throughout the museum, the designers of the installation, Edinburgh-based Studio MB, have opted for a more-is-more approach. Elsewhere portraits hang against dark blue panelling with carved memento mori motifs, biblical quotes are pasted on patinated mirrors, and in this opening space visitors walk on a map of Andalucía printed on the floor navigating the Guadalquivir river, highlighted in gold, like a galleon returning from the New World.

At the end of this space hangs Murillo's *St Ferdinand* (Fig.7), which was purchased by Ruffer in 2020. Previously in the collection of Infante Sebastián Gabriel de Borbón (1811–75), the painting disappeared from view after 1919, only to be rediscovered a century later at an auction in Denmark. Painted around 1671, the date of Ferdinand's canonisation, it is an exquisite example of the artist's *vaporoso* style as well as a testament to his role in the formulation and dissemination of the saint's cult. Murillo, who saw the corpse of Ferdinand on at least two occasions, designed the painting as a *vera effigies* (true portrait) with a fictive frame almost identical to that in his *Self-portrait* in the National Gallery, London. The format proved successful, with numerous iterations in print form, an example of which is displayed in a case nearby.⁶

Alongside this painting are two impressive works by Velázquez on long-term loan: *Philip IV hunting wild boar* (c.1632–37; National Gallery, London) and *Cardinal Astalli Pamphili* (Fig.6), lent by the Hispanic Society of New York. The Auckland Project has been the beneficiary of a considerable amount of institutional goodwill and the Hispanic Society

has lent some twelve paintings, all of which are in Britain for the first time. It is not clear why these two works by Velázquez, painted in Madrid and Rome respectively, have been placed as the climax of a room on the theme of Seville but this is indicative of the occasionally haphazard hang. It is

Opposite

2. The Long Dining Room at Auckland Castle, Bishop Auckland, with *Jacob and his twelve sons*, by Francisco de Zurbarán. (Photograph House of Hues).

3. The 'Cabbages and Kings' Room, The Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland. (Photograph House of Hues).

4. *Benjamin*, by Francisco de Zurbarán. Oil on canvas, 199.2 by 103 cm. (The Grimsthorpe and Drummond Castle Trust; © Grimsthorpe and Drummond Castle Trust; photograph Robert LaPrelle).



4 For evidence of the role that the arts can play in the regeneration of the region, see Centre for Economic and Business Research: *The Economic Value of Arts and Culture in the North of England: A Report for Arts Council England*, July 2019, available at www.artscouncil.org.uk, accessed 3rd February 2022.

5 J. Ruffer: *The Spanish Gallery*:

A Guide to the Works of Art, Bishop Auckland 2021, p.12.

6 *St Ferdinand*, by Matias Arteaga after Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, from F. de la Torre Farfán: *Fiestas de la Santa Iglesia de Sevilla*, Seville [1671]. See A. Wunder: 'Murillo and the canonisation of San Fernando', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 143 (2001), pp.670–75.

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unfortunate too that *Cardinal Astalli* hangs high over a case, and that the two Velázquez paintings, the *St Ferdinand* and another painting by Murillo are all hung within a small and rather claustrophobic space. Although working within the limits of pre-existing buildings is undoubtedly a challenge, more could have been done to give such exceptional works breathing room.

The *horror vacui* that pervades the display is most effective in the final room of the ground floor entitled 'Eternal Devotion'. This double-height hall displays numerous large-scale religious paintings that have been hung like a grand *retablo* (Fig.5). The wall weaves a narrative of Spanish art using sixteenth-century paintings, beginning with depictions of the Holy Family by El Greco and Luis de Morales (1509–86) and a small, gilded *retablo* by the little-known Valencian Martín Gómez the Elder (c.1500–62) and culminating in the late seventeenth century with Luca Giordano's *Ecstasy of Mary Magdalene* after Ribera (c.1660–65). Also in the room are several fine paintings by Murillo, including the newly conserved *Cherubs scattering flowers* (c.1675–80), on loan from Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, and an *Ecce Homo* (c.1670–75) that has been lent by the Colomer Collection, Madrid.

Ruffer's theatrical, metaphor-laden wall texts guide the visitor throughout. In one example on the ground floor, entitled 'Reflections on *Las Meninas*', he evokes, in the space of two lines, the similes of a lion, a parrot and a centipede to describe the Spanish empire. Although this whimsy is entertaining, it risks drowning the already complex historical

5. The 'Eternal Devotion' Room, The Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland. (Photograph House of Hues).

6. *Cardinal Astalli Pamphili*, by Diego Velázquez. 1650–51. Oil on canvas, 61 by 48.5 cm. (Hispanic Society of America, New York).



narrative in a sea of tumidity that can be hard to decipher. Such is the case in the museum's opening wall text, where Ruffer writes: 'there was a haunting reality that unchanging eternity was bounded by transience [. . .] It is the tension between them which gave this art its power. It had one foot in this world, another in the world to come'. This tone is also present in the hang. The final room, entitled 'Envoi!', is intended as a farewell to the 'genius of Spain'. It purports to focus on landscape, yet Ruffer chooses to reproduce a *Crucifixion* by El Greco as a diagrammatic wall graphic and hang a copy after Francisco Ribaltá's *St Francis embracing the crucified Christ* (c.1620–25) – neither of which predominantly concern the genre.

Attempts are made to convey the core historical information about early modern Spain: a simplified family tree of the Habsburgs, juxtaposed with portraits of the family – including Rubens's *Charles V* (c.1603) after a lost work by Titian, lent by the Royal Armouries Museum, Leeds – and an immersive video outlining the elements and interpretations of *Las Meninas* are both well done. The labels for the paintings, although not individually credited, are written by scholars, adding much-needed context and factual grounding. The collection would certainly benefit from a scholarly catalogue. Instead, there is a *Guide to the Works of Art*,

7 Ruffer, *op. cit.* (note 5), p.12.

8 L. Ruiz Gómez, ed.: exh. cat. *Juan Bautista Maino (1581–1649)*, Madrid (Museo Nacional del Prado) 2009–10, pp.170–72, no.30.

9 Sale, Sotheby's, London, 2nd May 2018, lot 46. The earliest known owner was the Basque industrialist Félix Fernández-Váldez Izaguirre (1895–1976).

10 See L. Ruiz Gómez: 'Dos patronos

para Maino', *ARS Magazine* 41 (2019), n.p.; and *idem*: exh. cat. *Obras maestras de la colección Valdés*, Bilbao (Museo de Bellas Artes) 2020–21, p.100, no.18.

11 E.K. Rowe: *Saint and Nation: Santiago, Teresa of Avila, and Plural Identities in Early Modern Spain*, University Park 2011.

12 Biblioteca Nacional de España, Madrid, inv. no.38745.

entirely written by Ruffer, which elaborates on his quasi-poetic vision of Spanish art ‘not [as] a dynamic born of the intellect, but a visceral cry to be spared what is, and to win what might be.’⁷

Despite the curious curatorial choices, the collecting of such a range of Spanish masters is to be applauded. It provides a near-unique opportunity in Britain to study lesser-known artists, including Juan de Juanes (1507–59), Luis Tristán (1586–1624) and Juan Martín Cabezalero (1633–73). Most impressive are three works convincingly attributed to Juan Bautista Maíno (1581–1649). The work of this painter turned Dominican friar has long presented a connoisseurial puzzle. Born in Pastrana, Guadalajara in 1581, he spent much of the first decade of the seventeenth century in Rome. Rather than adopting a single style, Maíno appears to have oscillated between different schools, fusing the tonal shifts of Caravaggio with the careful modelling and linearity characteristic of Orazio Gentileschi. A monographic exhibition at the

7. *St Ferdinand*, by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. c.1671. Oil on canvas, 170 by 114 cm. (The Zurbarán Trust).

8. *Christ on the Cross*, by Doménikos Theotokópoulos, known as El Greco. c.1600–10. Oil on canvas, 179.4 by 103.5 cm. (The Zurbarán Trust).

Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, in 2009–10 was a landmark for the study of the artist and one of the masterworks shown there, the *Penitent Magdalene* (c.1611–14), has found its way into Ruffer’s collection.⁸

Another of the paintings by Maíno goes beyond connoisseurial interest and is instead an image of national significance for Spain. It depicts St James and St Teresa of Ávila either side of the coat-of-arms of Castile and Aragon (Fig.1). The painting appeared at Sotheby’s in 2018 as ‘School of Madrid’ and was bought by Colaghni’s, who, following cleaning, attributed the work to Maíno.⁹ However, it was Morlin Ellis, advising Ruffer on the purchase, who identified this work as the only known painting of the so-called *Copatronazgo*, the controversial debate that aimed to install Teresa as a co-patron saint of Spain with St James.¹⁰ Following Urban VIII’s ruling against the campaign in 1629, on the grounds that it undermined the status of the cult of St James at Santiago, all images of the subject were ordered to be destroyed.¹¹ Prior to this painting’s discovery, the only known depiction of the *Copatronazgo* was a single loose-leaf print attributed to Francisco Heylan (1584–1650), in the National Library of Spain, Madrid.¹² The painting is an exceptional find and more research is needed to understand how this rare survivor evaded the tide of history.



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A highlight of the collection is El Greco's *Crucifixion*, dated to c.1600–10 (Fig.8). Sold at Christie's in 2015 as 'El Greco and studio', it has been cleaned and the attribution upgraded to full autograph status.¹³ It indeed looks powerful – it is dramatically lit and has all the characteristic bravura of El Greco. However, this reviewer would advocate caution in removing the reference to studio involvement. The composition is identical to that of Cleveland Museum of Art's *Christ on the Cross* (c.1600–10) and when the canvases are compared certain passages, such as the modelling of the feet and upper body, appear weaker in the Auckland painting. It was first exhibited as with studio assistance ('*El Greco y taller*'), in the exhibition *El Greco: Arte y Oficio* in Toledo in 2014, curated by Leticia Ruiz Gómez, which attempted to unpick the knotty question of El Greco's workshop practice.¹⁴ Nonetheless, the painting is an important acquisition. It is the most impressive El Greco, studio or otherwise, to enter a British museum collection in over sixty years and is the only large altarpiece by him on public display in the country.

The museum culminates on the fourth floor in a display entitled *In Ictu Oculi: In the Blink of an Eye*.¹⁵ This refers to the motto on one of Juan de Valdés Leal's two monumental *vanitas* paintings for the Hospital de la Caridad,

Seville. Both these masterpieces, painted in 1672, have been recreated in all their grizzled glory and are hung in a low-ceilinged, claustrophobic space. The entire floor is populated by replicas, each one riffing on the museum's theme of transience and eternity. These have been created by Factum Arte, a Madrid-based company that combines technology and craftsmanship to create remarkably convincing facsimiles. Curated by the company's founder, Adam Lowe, and the architect Charlotte Skene Catling, the result is an immersive sequence of spaces, which are both highly informative and eminently instagrammable. One room transports the visitor to the tiled interior of the sixteenth-century Casa de Pilatos in Seville (Fig.9) and another to a room in the Casa de Mesa in Toledo that combines *mudéja* stucco fragments from all three Abrahamic traditions.

Perhaps the most intriguing room on the fourth floor is the one dedicated to the powerful Inquisitor General and Archbishop of Toledo Cardinal Juan Pardo de Tavera (1472–1545; Fig.10). In its centre is a facsimile of the cardinal's marble sepulchre (1554–61) by Alonso Berruguete (c.1488–1561). It is Berruguete's only completed tomb and was finished mere months

9. The Casa de Pilatos Room, The Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland. (Photograph © James Morris for Factum Foundation).





before his own death in September 1561. On the adjacent wall are further copies: Tavera's death mask flanked by two portraits of him, attributed to Berruguete and El Greco respectively.¹⁶ El Greco, who painted this portrait some sixty years after the cardinal's death, must have used the mask and tomb as an aid, for all bear the same hollow-cheeked corpse-like image. The originals of all four of these works are housed in different spaces in the Hospital de Tavera, Toledo, and those that can travel are rarely lent – the El Greco, for example, is in poor condition, having been mutilated during the Spanish Civil War. The display, as with all Factum Arte projects, pushes the boundaries of what is possible in exhibition design. It evokes specific questions surrounding the Cardinal's image, but also broader issues about reproduction, education and immersive display. Furthermore, the transposition of both works of art and entire rooms from Spain to north-east England raise new possibilities for the sharing of art across geographic and cultural borders. Although the spaces are occasionally cramped, the overall effect will surely expand many visitors' horizons.

10. The Cardinal Tavera Room, The Spanish Gallery, Bishop Auckland. (Photograph © James Morris for Factum Foundation).

The Spanish Gallery, like all museums, is a work in progress: the hang will change, new acquisitions will arrive and less desirable paintings will be sold, loans will return to their institutions and others will, hopefully, take their place. Although there are weak points in its story of Spanish art – most notably in sculpture and fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century paintings – as well as works with condition issues, such as *Christ child asleep on the Cross* (1621–25) by the Neapolitan Massimo Stanzione (1585–1656), and while there is much still to be done – not least the creation of a scholarly catalogue and the reconsideration of certain wall texts and hangs – no museum is immaculately conceived or filled exclusively with masterpieces. If the role of a museum is not simply to educate or preserve *in perpetuum* those relics of the past that we deem worthy, but also to raise questions and incite curiosity, then to this end the Spanish Gallery succeeds in abundance: 'What treasures are hid in England!'

13 Sale, Christie's, London, 'Old Master and British Paintings Evening Sale', 9th July 2015, lot 34.
14 L. Ruiz Gómez, ed.: exh. cat. *El Greco: Arte y Oficio*, Toledo

(Fundación El Greco) 2014, pp.91–92, no.87. The exhibition was reviewed by Peter Cherry in this Magazine, 157 (2015), pp.57–59.
15 For full details of the display see:

A. Lowe and C.S. Catling: *A Guide to In Ictu Oculi. In the Blink of an Eye: Transience and Eternity in the Spanish Golden Age*, Bishop Auckland, 2021.

16 On the attribution of the portrait by Berruguete, see M. Arias Martínez: *Alonso Berruguete: Prometeo de la escultura*, Palencia 2011, p.203.