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Zurbarán at the National Gallery – devotion, sumptuously dressed

Saints and still lifes populate a compelling show of an overlooked Spanish painter with a particular flair for texture

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Published MAY 2 2026

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For the most devout painter of the Spanish baroque, who spent his career depicting saints and angels in strict adherence to church teaching, Francisco de Zurbarán has attracted a surprisingly worldly crowd of admirers.

"St Serapion, I wrap myself in the robes of your whiteness, which is like midnight in Dostoyevsky," wrote New York poet Frank O'Hara, addressing Zurbarán's dying "Saint Serapion", a figure swathed in voluminous ivory drapes, the cloth gently supporting his crucified body, its deep folds creating dark shadows against the radiant — divine — white purity. The head lolls as if merely drowsy; every gesture expresses submission.

The fervent white-shrouded figures who fill the early rooms of the London National Gallery's new exhibition *Zurbarán* with a strange brilliant luminosity — Mercedarian friars blessing Christian triumph over a vanquished Muslim ruler in "The Surrender of Seville"; monks swelling praise in the huge altarpiece "The Virgin of the Rosary"; a bald rustic worshipper in "The Adoration of the Shepherds" — are like nothing else in art, and nor is their legacy. They inspired Balenciaga's wedding gowns, Salvador Dalí, whose golden head "The Skull of Zurbarán" features half a dozen such penitents, and poets from the French romantics onward.

Zurbarán's 'The Surrender of Seville' (1629)

'Saint Serapion' (1628)

“What crime do you expiate with such remorse?” Théophile Gautier asked Zurbarán’s “white-robed Carthusians who, in the shadows/Pass silently over the stones of the dead”.

The question lingers in the National Gallery’s marvellous opening room. Here, “Saint Serapion” hangs opposite “The Apparition of Saint Peter to Saint Peter Nolasco” — a weird, near-surreal visitation of a naked, upside-down crucified man tumbling into the mind of another saint cloaked in cascading white. Between them is “The Crucifixion”, a gaunt muscular Christ stark and alone in a black void, the illusionism so heightened that its initial viewers thought it a sculpture.

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This trio, painted 1627-29, made Zurbarán's name in Seville, and is a compelling introduction today to an austere, fierce, unnerving artist. The tenebrism is derived from Caravaggio but the spiritual intensity concentrated in chiselled, astringent realism is particular to Zurbarán. So is the avoidance of graphic horror (bodies are pristine even in death) and the stoical inwardness with which Zurbarán imbues so many characters — from intent, hooded "St Francis in Meditation" in his coarse, tattered habit, his half-hidden face as shadowy as the skull he clutches, to the eager pageboy leading the viewer into "The Circumcision".

‘Saint Francis in Meditation’ (1635-39)

‘The Circumcision’ (1638-39)

‘The Apparition of Saint Peter to Saint Peter Nolasco’ (1629)

Zurbarán is the quiet, lesser-known third man of Spain's Golden Age painters born in the 1590s, and this first-ever UK retrospective, ranging from massive altarpieces to tiny still lifes, significantly enlarges our understanding of him and of that period.

Unlike his peers Velázquez, Madrid court painter and diplomat, exposed to every European trend, and José de Ribera, who worked in Naples, Zurbarán did not travel outside Spain, and would never match their sophistication. Instead, his fortunes, and the quality of his art — which is uneven — rose and fell with the fate of his adopted city: among nearly 40 paintings here, it is a dozen earlier ones from the 1620s-30s that are superbly original and captivating. He was, as his compatriot Ignacio Zuloaga later put it, "the Spanish painter. Whereas Velázquez is cosmopolitan and universal, Zurbarán could only ever be Spanish."

Seville in the 1620-30s allied undreamt-of wealth from transatlantic trade with harsh Counter-Reformation zeal, and if you wanted splendour dovetailed to piety, Zurbarán was your man. In "The Body of Saint Bonaventure" (1629), high point of the gallery's second room, the saint's corpse clothed, of course, in white, forms a striking diagonal casting light on the group of figures in mourning — James I of Aragón sporting a glamorous purple bow, Pope Gregory X in gold headdress — around the bier adorned in gleaming, expensive orange brocade.

'The Body of Saint Bonaventure' (1629)

In 1947, Picasso visited the Louvre to compare his "La Casserole émaillée" with this painting. "I want to tell something by means of the most common object: for example, a casserole, any old casserole, the one everybody knows. For me, it is a vessel in the metaphorical sense," he explained, placing himself in the Spanish sacred still-life tradition of which Zurbarán is the master.

In the National Gallery's own small, serene "Cup of Water and a Rose" — lit from above to emphasise the flower's reflection in the silver plate underneath and the shimmer of water in the cup — everyday objects symbolise the spiritual truth of the Virgin Mary's purity and love (the rose is thornless). Here we can see that composition repeated, first in "The Family of the Virgin", then in the stunning "Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose", where cool silver and pale ceramic contrast with warmer rough-skinned, fat citrons and oranges and their blossoms in a basket, their rhythm of lustre and shadow echoing that of the cup and rose.

‘Still Life with Lemons, Oranges and a Rose’ (1633)

‘Still Life with Four Vessels’ (1650)

Solemn and delicate in evoking each isolated group of objects, yet unifying them, the painting alludes to the Holy Trinity. But its musing on the material world as mysterious and fragile is for all time. It was for that gift of making visible the visionary, his flair for surface, texture, textile, that Counter-Reformation clerics valued Zurbarán.

The exhibition's gallery of stylish female saints would not disgrace a catwalk. "Saint Catherine of Alexandria" with velvet hair bow is regal in crimson. "Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia" has pearls and fluttering ribbons. "Saint Margaret of Antioch" plays the well-born shepherdess: crook, intricately plaited straw hat, woven-wool *alforjas* saddle bag. "Saint Apollonia", in pink and yellow silk, a chunky brooch fastening her emerald cape, grips a tooth with pincers — instrument of her martyrdom — like a fashion fetish. Across a jewel-encrusted gold dress that inspired a Balenciaga evening gown, "Saint Casilda", a Muslim princess who secretly supplied Christian prisoners with bread, spills red roses; the loaves miraculously transformed into flowers when her father, emir of Toledo, discovered her.

‘Saint Catherine of Alexandria’ (c1640)

‘Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia’ (c1640)

'Agnus Dei' (1635-40)

What none have, alas, is emotion; they stand rigid and neutral as the jugs and cups lined up in the severe and lovely "Still Life with Four Vessels" (1650). Indomitable, restrained, mute, this still-life is perhaps a self-portrait, for by then Zurbarán's luck had turned: commissions diminished as Seville's power waned, a plague in 1649 killed his adult son, and changing tastes favoured the younger Murillo's sweeter, softer forms.

The show's finale of late, vapidly saccharine "Virgin and Child" compositions, where Zurbarán vainly attempted to go against character and imitate Murillo, risks bathos, and is saved by a single, great interloper from the past: Zurbarán's uncanny "Agnus Dei" (1635-40). A sacrificial lamb, its rough white fleece as immaculately delineated as the saints' robes, lies bound and quiescent at death like "Saint Serapion" at the show's opening. But the animal is still breathing, and its pelt is spotlit in darkness with bright animating impasto patches: a homage to the life of the flesh as well as the spirit.

May 2-August 23, National Gallery, London; October 7-January 25, Louvre, Paris; February 28-June 20 2027, Art Institute of Chicago

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