



**FRANCISCO
DE ZURBARÁN**

DISTINGUISHED
PAINTER

JAVIER PORTÚS

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Francisco de Zurbarán, *Asher*, c. 1640–45
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Pages 6–7
Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Defence of Cadiz against
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CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS EUROPA HISPÁNICA (CEEH)

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INTRODUCTION

'I USED TO LIKE [El Greco] very much, but now I prefer Zurbarán, that very great painter who is so intensely Spanish and so little known in France.'¹ This is how Pablo Picasso replied to Jacint Salvadó in 1924 when asked about the Cretan artist. His remark sums up four of the characteristics that are associated with Francisco de Zurbarán: the interest and quality of his work; how highly it has been regarded by numerous artists (generally Spanish) since the mid-nineteenth century; the cliché about the vernacular nature or 'Spanishness' of his paintings; and a certain awareness that he is a painter who is insufficiently known outside Spain.

In the century that has elapsed since then, subsequent generations of artists and critics have continued to hold a high opinion of Zurbarán. Indeed, a much deeper understanding of his work has been gained through intense research and studies conducted mainly by Spanish, French and English-speaking historians, and public access to his paintings has been improved over the past half-century through a host of exhibitions and his growing presence in museums. This significant qualitative leap in terms of knowledge of his life and oeuvre and the ever-greater possibilities of studying his work in an international context suggests that we should qualify the statement about his paintings being primarily

'Spanish' in nature. Likewise, although the complaint about his oeuvre continuing to be insufficiently known internationally is sometimes still heard, the truth is that his pictures are increasingly featured in exhibitions dealing with stylistic and iconographic aspects of Baroque or Early Modern painting (and art in general). His works fit in naturally with these periods, though they always stand out for their powerful aesthetic personality and often for their compositional or narrative originality.

After El Greco, Diego Velázquez and Francisco de Goya, Zurbarán is the Early Modern Spanish painter to whom the largest number of catalogues raisonnés has been devoted over the past century. Martin S. Soria's compilation was published in 1953 and went through two editions: Paul Guinard brought out his in 1960; both Tiziana Frati and Julián Gállego and José Gudiol followed suit in the 1970s; and 2009 saw the publication of the first volume of Odile Delenda's catalogue, which is now the most up-to-date reference work and, thanks to its accuracy and wealth of information, provides a sound basis for any study of the painter, such as this one.² In addition, historians such as María Luisa Caturla and César Pemán, among others, devoted much of their research efforts to providing new information and new insights into the artist's life and work.³ For comparative purposes, it is worth noting that the first compilation of Josepe de Ribera's complete works dates from 1979, and a comprehensive catalogue of Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's oeuvre did not come out until 1981.⁴

DETAIL OF FIG. 105

Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Francis of Assisi*, 1636



1

From Seville to Madrid: A Painter in Golden Age Spain

AS POINTED OUT in the introduction, thanks to the intensive documentary research carried out since the mid-twentieth century, Francisco de Zurbarán is currently one of the seventeenth-century artists of whom we have a clearer picture as far as his working environments, the salient events of his professional life and finances, and the progression of his career are concerned.¹ Even so, as with most of his colleagues, we lack personal documents from which to draw any minimally reliable conclusions about his character, feelings or thoughts. The fact that back then, unlike in today's world, painters did not conceive of their art in terms of subjective expression also limits the possibility of gaining insights into important aspects of his personality. Historians, critics, other artists and the public inevitably attempt to connect with the human being behind the artworks we admire, and this has of course been the case with such a unique artist as Zurbarán. In this sense, he is a particularly good example of the extent to which this process is influenced by subjective and circumstantial judgements that tend to change over time.

Zurbarán lived from 1598 to 1664 – that is, from the year Philip II died to the year before his grandson Philip IV passed away. From a cultural history perspective, his lifetime coincided with what is known as the Spanish Golden Age, when writers such as Miguel de Cervantes,

Lope de Vega, Luis de Góngora, Francisco de Quevedo, Baltasar Gracián and Pedro Calderón and artists of the likes of El Greco (1541–1614), Juan Martínez Montañés (1568–1649), Francisco Ribalta (1565–1628), Gregorio Fernández (1576–1636), Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652), Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), Alonso Cano (1601–1667) and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682) produced many of their finest works. The 1630s and 1650s were also golden ages in the history of Spanish court culture, and these years witnessed the assembly of some of the finest picture collections on the continent, headed by those of Philip IV.² At the same time, this period of cultural splendour witnessed the start of a significant political decline that culminated in the Peace of Westphalia (1648), the treaties in which the Spanish monarchy lost its hegemony in Europe to France.

The main settings of Zurbarán's life were southern Extremadura (where he was born and took his first professional steps), the nearby city of Seville (where he trained as a painter and spent most of his career from 1626 to 1658) and Madrid (where he worked in 1634 and from 1658 until his death). Together with Madrid and Lisbon, Seville was one of the most cosmopolitan cities on the Iberian Peninsula and the main centres of artistic creation.

Zurbarán was born in Fuente de Cantos, a village then within the sphere of influence of Seville and now in the province of Badajoz. His parents were long thought to have been farmers, and, as we shall see, this influenced historiographical approaches to his life and work.

DETAIL OF FIG. 30

Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Anthony Abbot*, 1636





2

‘The Illustrious Artist’: Zurbarán’s Creative Consciousness

ANYONE WHO EXAMINES the history of Francisco de Zurbarán’s critical fortunes and oeuvre will realise the extent to which it has been heavily connoted. Up until a few decades ago, terms such as ‘humility’, ‘austerity’, ‘simplicity’, ‘mysticism’ and ‘silence’ were commonly used not only to describe his works or the impressions they elicit from viewers but also to outline the artist’s personality and character. This image was conditioned, on the one hand, by an interpretation of his painting in terms of prevailing nineteenth- and twentieth-century aesthetic and narrative interests and, on the other, by a selective view of the existing biographical information about the painter. The more accurate knowledge gained over the past decades about Zurbarán’s professional career, family environment and financial situation has been progressively calling for a reconsideration of this image.

This view of the painter reached a climax in some of the essays published in the mid-1960s in connection with the centenary of his death. A major study of the period commented that his language was ‘charming for its rustic and simple’ nature and described the artist himself as ‘uncouth and poor, an irremediable provincial of the great Baroque age, naive and tender, smacking of parochial’! These comments echo a long tradition of

interpretation and are also in tune with the artistic ideal that many Spanish artists of the period projected onto Zurbarán (which in turn had connotations of political ‘resistance’). For instance, Ramón Gaya, a cultured painter and the author of significant essays on art, stated of the Extremadura-born artist from his exile in Mexico: ‘We are dealing with an extremely simple man, almost boorish and ignorant – with one of those privileged, sanctified forms of ignorance which can rub shoulders with wisdom, which are possibly wisdom itself’.²

In contrast, the information gleaned from some of Zurbarán’s works, his early biographies and much of the archival documentation, as well as from studying his output in the context of Sevillian art of his time, paints quite a different picture. Indeed, these sources point to an artist with a refined creative awareness and a keen ability to navigate the complex professional landscape of Sevillian painting of his day; a creator capable of renewing his own repertoire several times with intelligence and originality; and an entrepreneur who took pains to diversify his sources of income. Indeed, the definitions of Zurbarán that prevailed for a time are incompatible with the achievement of a prominent place in any major centre of artistic creation in Europe, including Seville. This view was partly the result of living artists applying their own criteria to the writing of art history. In recent decades, the historiographical image of Zurbarán has become more balanced, in keeping with the documentary evidence and a better understanding of his milieu.³

DETAIL OF FIG. 67

Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Veil of Saint Veronica*,
c. 1635–40

Zurbarán's works are not only unique for their metapictorial emphasis. They are also notable for their content. While frontal versions of the Holy Face continued to predominate in his day, such as Claude Mellan's well-known engraving dated 1649 [fig. 68], the Spanish painter made two radical changes to the standard type. Firstly, his Christ is no longer hieratic and frontal but looks at us from a sideways position [see fig. 67]. In other words, his face is more that of the real Christ on his way to Calvary, weighed down by the cross and gazing at the viewer to elicit empathy. Secondly, far from having sharply defined features that stand out clearly from their surroundings, the faces in these images devised by Zurbarán are depicted with a medium that imitates red chalk, giving them a more blurred appearance. In fact, the painter progressively diminished the definition from one version to another to the point that it has almost disappeared in the Valladolid version of 1658 [fig. 69] and the Bilbao version of about 1660. The sideways position and suffering expression of the face, its blurredness, and the use of ochre or reddish inks suggest an attempt by Zurbarán to reconstruct the subject according to historical logic rather than cultural tradition. In other words, he 'takes stock' of all the circumstances and imagines Veronica bringing a cloth to the suffering Christ's face, which became imprinted on it with blood. Zurbarán is a painter characterised by his extraordinary descriptive precision and his painstaking and detailed style. We see this, for example, in his skilled rendering of the folds and texture of these cloths. It is therefore particularly telling to compare the very sparing depiction of the faces of Christ in the Veil of Veronica paintings with how his face is portrayed in other compositions. Take, for instance, the *Christ gathering his Clothes after the Flagellation* in Jadraque [fig. 70], signed in 1661, where Christ's head is also turned to gaze at the viewer but is rendered with an extraordinary degree of precision. This comparison alerts us to the anomaly within Zurbarán's output of these faces imprinted with blood on the cloths and suggests a profound and original reflection on one of the cornerstones of the Catholic imaginary. Such a meditation would have been aimed at achieving historical veracity, in a very similar way to Pedro J. Valero, Constable of Artillery of the city

FIG. 70. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ gathering his Clothes after the Flagellation*, 1661. Oil on canvas, 167 x 107 cm. Signed and dated. Jadraque, Iglesia parroquial

of Alicante, when he was called upon in 1689 to examine the Alicante Holy Face. According to his son Fernando, Don Pedro claimed that the original face was a rather faint 'imprint of blood' and that 'the ancients, wishing to give more shape to that imprint, retouched the eyebrows, lips and part of the face with a brush'.⁴² Zurbarán decided to embrace the idea of the 'imprint of blood' and exploit its full dramatic and devotional potential, resulting in some of the most impressive and moving versions of the subject.

One of the most important seventeenth-century European paintings on the relationship between art and religion is Zurbarán's *Crucified Christ with a Painter in the Museo del Prado* [fig. 71]. This work, for which no iconographic precedent has been found, is comparable in originality and subtlety to his interpretations of the Veil of Saint Veronica. The earliest documentary references to the picture date from the nineteenth century, when it was part of the collection of the Infante Sebastián of Bourbon. It is not known for whom or when it was painted, although certain similarities with a *Crucified Christ with Saint John, Mary Magdalene and the Virgin* (private collection) signed in 1655 have led it to be dated to the 1650s.⁴³

Various hypotheses have been put forward about the identity of the artist in the picture: some historians consider this figure to be a self-portrait; others believe he is Saint Luke, as he is wearing ancient clothing. Zurbarán probably did not intend to represent anyone in particular but rather to make a general allusion to professional painters.⁴⁴ This was not the only time that Zurbarán depicted the crucified Christ accompanied by other figures. In the *Crucified Christ with a Donor*, a painting in the Museo del Prado dated 1640, a full-frontal, lifeless Christ with his head slumped forward is accompanied by a half-length donor in the lower left corner with his hands clasped in prayer and gazing at the viewer. The fact that the donor is dressed in the fashion of the painter's day suggests that it is a portrait, especially as he is looking towards the viewer.





3

In Pursuit of a Language

THE PERSONALITY OF Francisco de Zurbarán, one of the most distinctive artists of the Spanish Golden Age, was reflected in his style of execution, his compositional devices, his palette and his subject matter of choice. As a result, his name has come to be closely associated with a specific way of describing objects, people and settings, and with a repertoire of themes which he infused with individuality.

This language can be traced back to his earliest secure works. They encompass the paintings he produced in 1626–27 for the Monastery of San Pablo el Real, such as the imposing *Crucifixion* which hung in the sacristy in 1627 [see fig. 1]; the *Saint Serapion* he executed in 1628 for the Monastery of La Merced Calzada [see fig. 2]; and the pictures he made in 1628 and 1629 for the College of San Buenaventura [see figs 7, 87 and 145], all three in Seville. Given the maturity of these paintings (several of which are among his masterpieces), it is regrettable that next to nothing is known about his activity during his early years as an independent artist, when he was forging his stylistic identity. Judging by these pictures and by the fact that he already had a workshop capable of taking on numerous commissions, this early and unknown period must have been a fruitful one, in which he found an aesthetic identity that would mark the rest of his career.

DETAIL OF FIG. 85

Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Family of the Virgin*, c. 1630–35

This group of works defines Zurbarán as what was then known as an 'imitator of nature'; in other words, it places him among the group of artists who were championing 'nature' as the fundamental subject matter for painting in Spain (and the rest of Europe) in the early seventeenth century. This approach stood in opposition to the earlier idealistic and classicist tradition according to which the visible world was imperfect and it was the duty of art to perfect it through selective imitation. Zurbarán, along with Diego Velázquez, was the Spanish artist of his generation who remained most faithful to the naturalist ideal. These preferences also classify him as a professional with artistic and intellectual 'concerns' who was dissatisfied with inherited tradition and aspired to practise a new language; once again, this distances him from the usual interpretative framework described in the previous chapter.

Zurbarán's 'naturalism' is discernible in several characteristic expressive traits and devices which, when combined, serve to distinguish his work from that of colleagues of his who also espoused this trend. Notable among these features is the extraordinary effort he put into description, which led him to render forms, volumes and textures in painstaking detail and with great accuracy in an illusionistic attempt to deceive viewers into mistaking what he painted for what was real. In Zurbarán's pictures, each object or fabric has its own qualities, and he often conceived of painting in terms of *trompe l'oeil*, as we saw earlier in connection with the *cartellini*. This naturalistic impulse also drove him to try to



FIG. 97. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Young Lamb*, 1635-40. Oil on canvas, 37.3 x 62 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, P007293

an inscription or religious symbol. Zurbarán made use of these symbols or inscriptions in some of his versions of the lamb, such as those in the San Diego Museum and the San Fernando Academy of Fine Arts [figs 99 and 100], where there is a halo above the animal's head and inscriptions at the bottom edge reading 'Tanquam Agnus' in the San Diego picture and 'Tanquam Agnus / in occisione' in the Madrid painting, which is dated 1639.³⁴

The fact that the painting in the Academy was signed in 1639, and that the two dated versions of the 'ram' are from the early part of that decade, as well as the absence of any explicit religious references in them, raises several questions about Zurbarán's initial intention. Indeed, it is likely that what started out largely as motifs that he was testing as part of his experimentation in the field of still life ended up becoming a basis for images with

an explicit religious content. A possible answer to this question can be found by observing the differences between the animals: in the Agnus Dei pictures they have no horns, as befits the definition of 'Lamb of God'; whereas in the other (in all likelihood earlier) versions we are specifically dealing with young rams. In other words, when the painter wished to explicitly indicate an Agnus Dei, he depicted a defenceless creature. An interesting parallel of this development can be drawn with the contemporary interpretations of *Still Life with Citrons, Oranges and a Rose*, although, obviously, decontextualising it. Just as in the twentieth century the aesthetic values of the Pasadena painting led to a predominance of religious interpretations, in the 1630s those same values, which can also be observed in the versions of the 'ram with its legs bound', coupled with the highly emotional content of the representation and the possibility of relating it to a quintessential Christian image, resulted in what were initially formulas with no explicit sacred content being transformed by Zurbarán into religious images by removing the creature's horns and adding haloes



FIG. 98. Stefano Maderno, *Saint Cecilia*, 1599. Marble. Rome, Basilica di Santa Cecilia

and inscriptions. In all cases, they still retained their sacrificial content and highly emotional atmosphere.

Furthermore, the possibility that these 'rams' were initially conceived as still life, devoid of any religious associations, is supported by some of the critical responses they received at a time when a Catholic worldview predominated in Spain. For example, the painter, treatise writer and priest Antonio Palomino simply commented in the early eighteenth century that 'an enthusiast in Seville has a young lamb by this artist, painted from life, which he says he values more than a hundred live rams'.³⁵ At no point does Palomino suggest that the picture is anything more than a representation of an animal. Similarly, a painting of this nature listed in a Madrid inventory of 1694 is described as 'A painting of a ram, an original by Francisco de Zurbarán'.³⁶

Viewed with the hindsight of almost four centuries, the re-signifying of the 1633 still life by contemporary historiography and Zurbarán's own transformation of the rams into Agnus Dei paintings indicate the artist's extraordinary ability to exploit all the emotional and dramatic possibilities of a genre that was a priori 'insignificant'. Still life was one of the fields that allowed him to offer the best of himself and tap into his unrivalled talent for describing textures, dramatic handling of light sources and compositional genius to create some of the

most unique images of his time, the sight of which inspires in viewers a mixture of amazement at his imitative ability, emotion elicited by their content, and suspense deriving from their powerful sense of apparition and presence.

But when discussing these masterpieces, we must not forget the biographical and professional context in which they were created, as pointed out in the first chapter. We are not simply dealing with an abstract desire to explore the expressive possibilities of a genre that was still in its infancy at the time, as these pictures also stemmed from a conscious choice that was part of a strategy Zurbarán embarked upon in the early 1630s, when he settled in Seville, to avoid relying exclusively on institutional commissions and carve out a niche in the private art market. As we have seen, during the course of this process he turned to devotional prototypes (Virgins of the Immaculate Conception, Saint Francis figures, and later female saints or scenes from the childhood of Christ), but he also decided to venture into a field which Velázquez had already successfully explored and which was perfectly suited to his own talents as a painter, namely still life. Furthermore, Velázquez's move



FIG. 125. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Asher*, c. 1640–45. Oil on canvas, 201 x 104 cm. Bishop Auckland, Auckland Palace

FIG. 126. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Joseph*, c. 1640–45. Oil on canvas, 201 x 103 cm. Bishop Auckland, Auckland Palace





4

The Advent of International Fame

AT THE DAWN of the nineteenth century, Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez published his *Diccionario histórico de los más ilustres profesores de las bellas artes en España* (1800), a historical dictionary of the most illustrious practitioners of the fine arts in Spain. Compiling several hundred biographies in six volumes, it was similar in structure and scope to Antonio Palomino's earlier treatise, *El museo pictórico y escala óptica* [The Pictorial Museum and Optical Scale] (1724), from which Ceán drew a wealth of information. However, the more than seven decades separating the two publications was reflected in a considerable increase in the number of artists Ceán included and the amount of accurate information gathered about them, as well as a new historiographical approach: whereas Palomino's biographies served the general purpose of praising the art of painting – and his information was therefore prone to doctoring or elaboration – Ceán had a 'modern' conception of history and attempted to base his writings on documentable facts.

Its wealth of reliable information made the *Diccionario* the most important nineteenth-century source on Spanish art. As far as Zurbarán is concerned, it is very interesting both for what it contributed and for what it questioned about Palomino's biographical account. Notable new additions were his baptismal record of 1598 and a well-ordered list of the main places where the artist's works were located – a particularly important contribution

bearing in mind that only a few years later they began to be widely dispersed. Ceán's critical judgements are also interesting: he stressed the artist's fidelity to nature and descriptive skills, which served to define him as the 'Spanish Caravaggio'.

Among the information provided by Palomino and omitted by Ceán is the anecdote about Philip IV, who, according to the treatise writer, used to go and watch Zurbarán paint and once, laying his hand on his shoulder, uttered the words 'painter of the king, and king of painters' [see fig. 46]. Palomino was very fond of stories of this kind and used them in connection with Alonso Sánchez Coello (c. 1531–1588), Diego Velázquez and Juan Carreño de Miranda and their respective monarchs too. Indeed, they fit in well with the general context of praise for painting that is central to his book. Although Ceán did not omit Palomino's information about Seville city council inviting Zurbarán to establish himself in the city, he seriously questioned it, arguing that 'it had no need to honour a foreigner so extraordinarily when there was an abundance of good and excellent patrician painters [in Seville], more so than in other cities of the kingdom!'

As we know, in this case Palomino's information was correct and it was Ceán who was mistaken. For although he acknowledged many of Zurbarán's particular merits, Ceán was unaware of how exceptional he was in the Sevillian painting scene of the second quarter of the seventeenth century. In this respect the author was probably influenced by his extraordinary admiration for Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, which was shared by his contemporaries and stemmed from affinities with the prevailing taste in his

DETAIL OF FIG. 144
Édouard Manet, *Monk in Prayer*, c. 1865



FIG. 140. Théodore Chassériau, *The Reverend Father Dominique Lacordaire*, 1840. Oil on canvas, 146 × 107 cm. Paris, Musée du Louvre, RF 1584

FIG. 141. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Peter Thomas*, c. 1633. Oil on canvas, 92.4 × 32.1 cm. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Zoe Oliver Sherman Collection, inv. 23.554

uncovered, so that all the expressiveness is concentrated in the subject's closed eyes; and the Franciscan rope belt does not blend in with the habit but is a similar shade of white to the skull and, like the latter, enlivens the chromatic play. Like Zurbarán, Manet portrays the monk in a dark setting. However, he differs from him in terms of the overall effect and mood: whereas Zurbarán's *Saint Francis* is an introspective work, which the viewer observes as an intruder, Manet, despite closing the monk's eyes, 'exhibits' him. That is why he avoids placing him as near as Zurbarán does and instead distances him by positioning the skull between the figure and the viewer. The two artists also differ in their style of execution, as in this painting Manet favours the broad strokes of his Velázquez-inspired works rather than the painstaking and detailed rendering that characterises Zurbarán's paintings.

Corot and Manet were not isolated cases in their 'reworking' of Zurbarán's images. Taking as a starting point the composition of *Saint Bonaventure at the Council of Lyons at the Louvre* [fig. 145], in *An Honourable Penitent* [fig. 146] Alphonse Legros (1837–1911) simplifies it, constructs a scene from religious history and adapts Zurbarán's execution and facial types to his own, equally realistic style.²⁰ His interest in the Spanish master can be seen in several other works, especially those with ecclesiastical subjects, such as *Rehearsing the Service* (c. 1870; London, Tate Britain), where he combines the Extremaduran master's skilled rendering of textures with Holbein's painstaking descriptions of all the blemishes in the skin.

As we have already pointed out, although many nineteenth-century European and American artists appreciated early Spanish paintings and occasionally used them as a basis for some of their own pictures, in Manet's case his artistic conception was decisively shaped





FIG. 142. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Francis in Meditation*, c. 1635-39. Oil on canvas, 152 x 99 cm. London, The National Gallery, NG230

FIG. 143. Camille Corot, *Franciscan Monk kneeling*, c. 1840-45, retouched c. 1870. Oil on canvas, 48 x 34 cm. Signed. Paris, Musée du Louvre, RF 1980 194



by them (especially following his trip to Spain in 1865). And given the role he played in breathing new life into the French painting scene, that choice effectively influenced the development of later art. The Spanish artist who chiefly interested Manet and the colleagues who followed him was Velázquez, whose stylistic, compositional and

thematic features were more in tune with the new times. Over the years, Velázquez was progressively joined by Goya and El Greco, with the latter eventually taking over from and supplanting him.²⁶ The nineteenth-century impact of other major artists considered to be part of the 'Spanish school', such as Murillo, Ribera and Zurbarán, was



5

Zurbarán after 1900

AS WE HAVE SEEN, the most salient events of the nineteenth century as far as the so-called 'Spanish school' was concerned were its 'discovery' by foreign critics and audiences; its inclusion as a distinct phenomenon in accounts of the history of European painting; the large-scale dispersal of heritage that resulted in numerous Spanish works gradually finding their way into European museums and collections and boosting their visibility in general; and the 'current relevance' of some of its most important practitioners, who became sources of inspiration for contemporary artists. Once the existence, scope and characteristics of a 'Spanish school' had been acknowledged and its foremost representatives identified, the contribution made by the twentieth century involved fine-tuning the instruments of art historical analysis (in which the professionalisation of art history played a part) and bringing new names and new phenomena such as still life into the general discussion. As for the names, references to Francisco de Goya (1746–1828) became an essential means of demonstrating the extent to which it was a 'school' that continued; and the need to study Pablo Picasso (1881–1973) as the penultimate link in that chain is being increasingly stressed – something that is compatible with the relevance of examining him in relation to other contexts. After Picasso, many twentieth-century Spanish artists worked on the premise that they were part of

a national tradition, and this often conditioned their output itself and the expectations of their Spanish and international audiences.

The above information is relevant to Francisco de Zurbarán insofar as he had been touted as the 'most Spanish' of his colleagues – a definition whose effect was at once limiting and enriching. It was limiting because many of the approaches to his artistic personality and professional profile have been conditioned by that label, which has sometimes proven reductive. And it was enriching because it has stimulated interest in him more than in other colleagues of his such as Bartolomé Esteban Murillo or Jusepe de Ribera; indeed, the wealth of information currently available about his life and professional activity is far greater than it was in 1900. This classification of him as a 'Spanish painter' has been handed down and renewed and, as we shall see, as a result successive generations of local artists have happily considered him their predecessor.

In terms of the monographs and catalogues raisonnés to which his work has given rise, the exhibitions devoted to him, and the references and tributes from contemporary artists during the twentieth and twenty-first century so far, out of the early Spanish painters Zurbarán is surpassed only by Diego Velázquez, El Greco and Goya. This is not due to 'objective' factors related to the quality, originality and intrinsic interest of his works – as Ribera and Murillo shine as brightly as he does in that respect – but rather to the ability of his paintings and his historiographical status to engage with the aesthetic and literary interests of contemporary critics and art.

DETAIL OF FIG. 153

Pablo Picasso, *Jug, Candle and Enamel Pan*, 1945



in incorporating materials into his canvases and exploring the expressive possibilities of different textures. In 1952 he visited the Museo del Prado for the first time and was deeply impressed by Zurbarán, whose *Still Life with Vessels* [see fig. 154] was a source of inspiration for some of his still lifes.¹⁶⁰ Throughout his career, he paid several such tributes to artists (Picasso, Miró, Joaquín Mir [1873–1940], Valdés Leal, Bosch and Millares) and a few political figures (Che Guevara, Salvador Allende)¹⁶¹ in a group of works that reveal the historical, artistic and political context with which he wished to be associated. In this case, the reference to Zurbarán is implicit in the immaculate white, its contrast with the black of the charred wood, and the tear in the white fabric, which creates folds reminiscent of Zurbarán's Mercedarian saints and recalls the opening in the habit of the *Blessed Henry Suso* (c. 1698–40) [fig. 173] through which we see the monogram 'IHS' engraved with blood on his chest. Writers of the time were quick to spot the link between Guinovart and Zurbarán. The prominent critic and poet Rafael Santos Torroella, for example, wrote that the Catalan artist 'brings to mind the image of his predecessor through the insistence, I would almost

say violence, with which he seems to feel the need for a powerful materialisation of the image, to make it tangible, existing in its own right'.¹⁶²

These values of 'tangibility' appear, albeit formulated in a very different way, in *Homage to Zurbarán* (1974; private collection), a work by Francisco Ferreras (1927–2021) featuring the white habit of a Zurbaranesque monk stripped of its wearer, maximising the possibilities of interpreting these fabrics in abstract terms. Silhouetted against a black background and including two earthy, highly textured colour fields, it brings together several of the key factors which artists of the time admired in their predecessor from Extremadura.¹⁶³

FIG. 170. Pablo Palazuelo, *Autumns*, 1952. Oil on canvas, 82 × 143 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, ASO8115

FIG. 171. Francisco de Zurbarán, *The Apotheosis of Saint Jerome*, c. 1640–43. Oil on canvas, 145 × 103 cm. Guadalupe, Monasterio de Santa María





FIG. 183. Bill Viola, *Catherine's Room*, 2001. Colour video polyptych on five LCD flat panel displays mounted on wall, 38 × 246 × 5.7 cm, 18'39 minutes. Performer: Weba Garretson. Tate and National Galleries of Scotland

exhibitions, such as those held in recent years in Ferrara, Brussels, Lyon and Barcelona, and the series of three (London, Paris, Chicago) now running.

As well as being more limited in context compared to El Greco or Goya, these historiographical and artistic approaches share other characteristics. The most salient is a definition of Zurbarán's painting that has far more to do with contemporary artistic experience and the values that the twentieth century has attributed to his oeuvre than with an analysis based on the creative environment in which he actually worked. This fact, which is inevitable, has greatly influenced the reception of his work, both positively and (sometimes) negatively. Terms such as 'humility', 'silence', 'solemnity', 'austerity', 'introspection' and 'mysticism', among others, frequently come up in

this book. Obviously, these concepts were rarely part of the critical vocabulary of Zurbarán's time. What is more, they refer to values more closely associated with artists than with art historians; indeed, it was only after certain formal qualities of Zurbarán's painting were identified in key Cubists that they spread to other fields of art historical practice. This chapter shows the extent to which Spanish artists continued to respect Zurbarán, and how that appreciation was underpinned by the possibility of finding



FIG. 184. Francisco de Zurbarán, *Christ and the Virgin in the House of Nazareth*, c. 1645. Oil on canvas, 165 × 218.2 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund, inv. 1960.117

in his works a type of content that was sometimes used to support a moral or political stance. While all this was happening, art historians were striding towards a more comprehensive understanding not only of Zurbarán's oeuvre but also of his life and the art historical contexts in which he moved, both in Andalusia and at the court in Madrid. As for a critical perspective, however, the view of him fuelled by artists not only remained predominant until a few decades ago but even influenced the perception of him as a professional. That is, many historians projected artists' admiration for his austere colours and the sense of silence his works convey onto the painter's life, which came to be similarly described in terms of social and intellectual modesty. This occurred even though long-known records and subsequently discovered documents would have served to refute such a view.

The example of Zurbarán serves to illustrate, once again, just how varied the factors are that shape our view of great masters, and that the active dialogue that successive generations of artists maintain with them is a crucial factor. And it does not matter that, as in this case, the result is a distorted art historical analysis. For the admiration that Picasso, Gris, Dalí, Saura, Fernández, Tàpies and Palazuelo felt for their predecessor kept his painting alive among us and decisively enriched the twentieth-century experience of it.



This book was printed in 2026,
400 years after Francisco de Zurbarán
moved to work in Seville.