

Miraculous! The artist we should all be worshipping

The National Gallery is giving Zurbarán his first UK show — at last, says **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**

Can only the faithful fall in love with Francisco de Zurbarán? Do you have to be Christian before his paintings convince? You may well assume as much. Who in our modern secular age can be blamed for backing off warily from some of his more bewildering confections? Take, for instance, the picture that will open a forthcoming National Gallery show.

A monk kneels before the figure on an inverted cross that, plummeting downwards into dusky spaces, suffuses the darkness with an ochre glow. The most committed Roman Catholic might have trouble interpreting it. Even if you recognise the crucified figure as the apostle Peter, who, believing himself unworthy to die in the manner of his divine master, requested that his cross be turned upside down, in today's world few could identify the kneeling monk. He is St Peter Nolasco, the 13th-century founder of the Mercedarian friars who, lamenting that he could not make a pilgrimage to the shrine of his apostolic patron, was consoled by a celestial vision of his namesake.

Let the weirdness of this image lure, not deter you. The National Gallery

exhibition is the first UK show to focus on the work of this most emphatically religious of Spanish baroque masters. Gathering close to 50 canvases from collections all over the world, many of which haven't been shown in this country before, it will set out to cover the full range of a career that encompassed a foray into mythological drama, a handful of historical scenes and an outstanding talent for minutely rendered still lifes.

But the divine dominates. Who else brings us such a bizarre gallimaufry of saints? You may know Zurbarán's St Francis of Assisi from the National Gallery: that stark, all but hallucinatory image of a cowed figure, his praying hands clutching tight round the skull that he clasps to his chest. This monk is now joined by a procession of rather less familiar companions, St Bonaventure, St Casilda and St Alphonsus Rodriguez among them, not to mention St Serapion, who, following the founding tenet of his order — to rescue captured Christians from the enslaving Muslims by offering themselves as prisoners instead — set off for north Africa. There, bound hand and foot, beaten and dismembered, he met his end. Not that Zurbarán gives us the grisly detail. He focuses on the face

of the slumped martyr, who, with strapped arms outstretched, appears at peace with his fate.

Here is a show that features no less than five crucifixions. One painting offers a front-row seat at the ceremony of Christ's circumcision. The naked baby is placed at the very centre of the composition. A page boy in the foreground turns to meet our gaze, as if encouraging us to step forward and peer closer between tiny kicking legs pushed firmly apart by a knife-wielding priest.

Even in our western culture, which for more than 600 years (between the 13th and 19th centuries) was shaped predominantly by Christianity, Zurbarán stands out. Does this leave him, today, outmoded? This show should convince you otherwise. It will reveal why, alongside his friend Velázquez and the younger Murillo, he is considered one of the triumvirate of the finest artists in 17th-century Spain.

Zurbarán was born in 1598 in a small town in Extremadura. The son of a textile merchant, he was dispatched at the age of 16 to apprentice himself to an artist in Seville, at that time one of the largest, wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities in Europe. It was there that he lived for almost all his life, fulfilling endless commissions for

churches, convents and monasteries, oratories, sacristies and cloisters, as well as working for private patrons and for export to the American markets with which Seville (before 1680, when Cadiz replaced it as the centre of overseas commerce) was conducting a highly lucrative trade.

The new exhibition will illustrate his range, from an immense 15m altarpiece (long since disassembled, so only three sections are now shown) to a tiny picture of a cup of water and a rose — a much favoured motif commonly interpreted as a symbol of Marian purity. It will also include images from a series depicting the labours of Hercules that Zurbarán executed during a 1634-35 trip to the royal court in Madrid, where he worked alongside Velázquez on an enormous decorative scheme. At 60 he moved to Madrid to live. By then he had lost two wives and all six of his children, of whom some did not survive infancy and others (like his painter son Juan, whose beautiful still-life canvases form part of this show) died in the 1649 plague that killed more than half the population of Seville. Zurbarán died in 1664.

Zurbarán, committed to his Catholic faith — and presumably to the lucrative commissions it could bring — was working in the wake of the Council of Trent. In a bid to combat Protestant reform the Catholic church was seeking to revitalise faith by returning to spiritual roots, fostering prayerful devotion and an acceptance of mysticism. Religious art, it was

believed, had a powerful role to play in this renewal.

A 1627 crucifixion, coming on loan from Chicago, hung for almost 200 years behind a grille in a gloomily lit sacristy. So powerful was its form, Zurbarán's 18th-century biographer, Antonio Palomino, wrote, "that everyone who sees it and does not know it, believes it to be a sculpture". Zurbarán, who, as an apprentice had also learnt carving, draws on this youthful training, on the examples of anyone from Raphael to Dürer, creating theatrical diagonals that sweep the eye into a story (*The Adoration of the Magi*) or, like Caravaggio, leaving space at the foreground so viewers feel involved.

Stark contrasts of dark and light, also learnt from Caravaggio, create the drama that stirs responsive emotion. Meticulously detailed portrayals — faces that sometimes would seem to be portraits, the tactile folds of draped fabrics and everyday objects he renders so realistically — make the spiritual feel present. Sometimes he lodges his figures in contemporary settings, swathes saints in the textiles with which he, as the son of a cloth-trading father, was familiar.

Among the highlights will be his superlative 1635-40 *Agnus Dei*, on loan from the Prado, showing a trussed lamb lying helpless on a ledge. The title — *Lamb of God* — endows it with religious significance. But so precisely rendered is the softness of its curling fleece, so tenderly painted is the pinkness of its nose, so keenly observed is the light that falls on

curving horns, that it has the qualities of a meticulous still life. "The most perfect representation that was ever painted on canvas" was the opinion of one 18th-century British traveller. Then you notice the eyes: so brightly alive behind their long, pale lashes. The binding ropes cut into the pastern. How can you help but feel compassion? The fettered beast may be symbolic of the sacrificed son of God, but you don't need to know this to feel an empathetic connection. Its upturned hoofs project over the ledge as if into your space. It is part of your world.

When it comes to the work of Francisco de Zurbarán it may help to be Christian, and perhaps more particularly Roman Catholic. But even the most determinedly secular can tap into his power. Art can work miracles. Zurbarán's paintings prove that.

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Agnus Dei, c 1635-40, and, left, Saint Casilda, c 1635, by Francisco de Zurbarán



**Zurbarán, National
Gallery, London,
Sat to Aug 23**