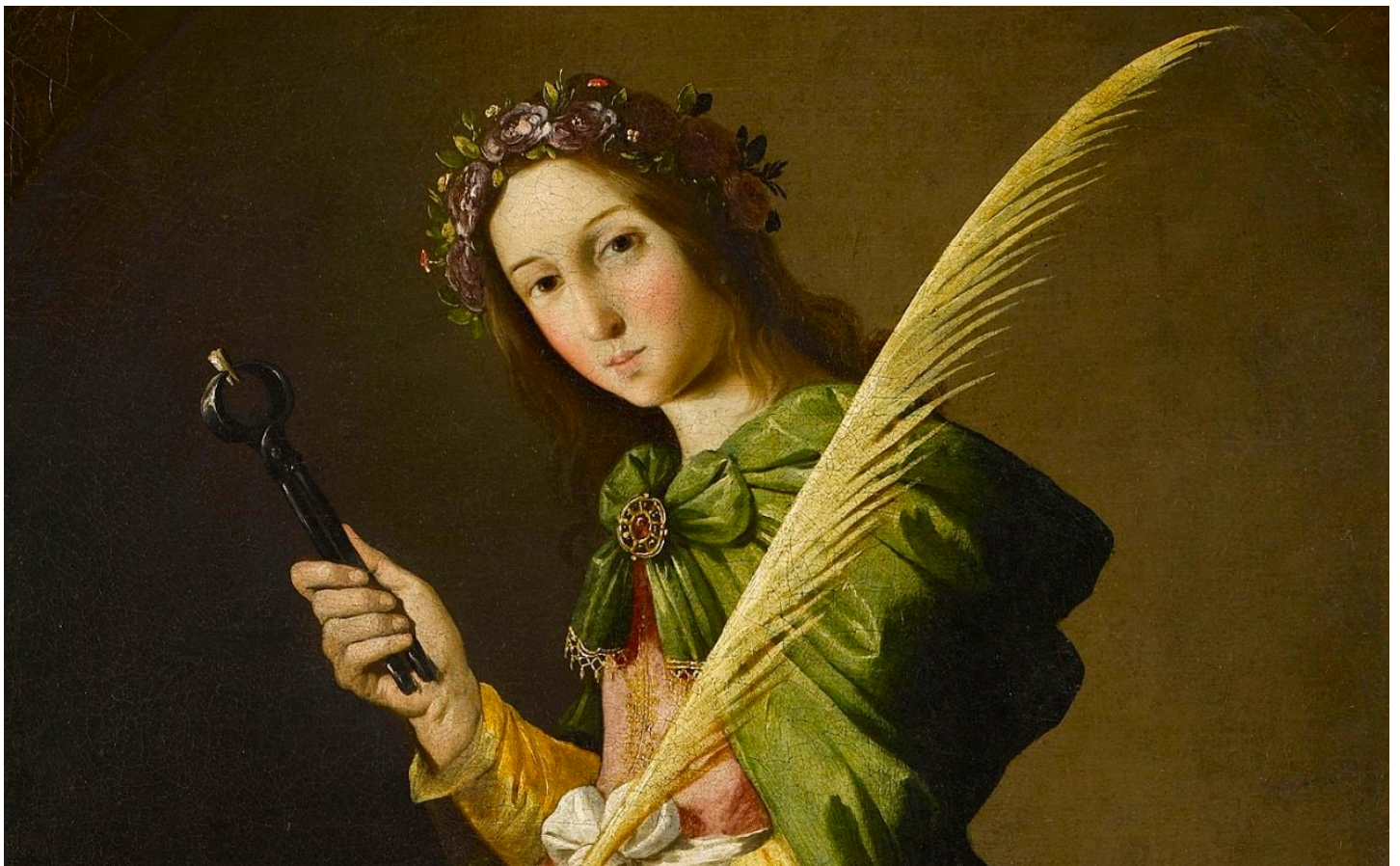


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These life-size female saints are more than just pretty faces

For centuries Zurbarán's paintings were hidden away. Now at the National Gallery, they offer respite from our overheated days of uncertainty



Detail from Saint Apollonia by Francisco de Zurbarán (c1636-40) Credit: GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchalle



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Thirty years ago, in the airless rooms of the Museo de Bellas Artes in Seville, I came across a whole corridor of female saints, dressed to the nines. St Dorothy wore a magnificent rose silk gown, crumpling onto the ground, a striped black-and-yellow wrap loosely held over her upper arms. St Matilda had a yellow skirt and a red wrap over an upper garment of brocade so heavy she'd

have been well advised to mount it on wheels. They had been painted, life-size, in the 17th-century by the Spanish artist Francisco de Zurbarán.

Last year, when the Thyssen-Bornemisza museum in Madrid borrowed eight of these female saints for an exhibition, its website carried a quotation attributed to Zurbarán: “No, these are not frivolous fashions. When I paint these holy women dressed like this, I do so in order to impart greater realism to the image.” The trouble is that the quotation was made up. Worse still, it sells short a painter whose true intentions we can understand only by looking at the 290 or so pictures that survive him.

Now, five of Zurbarán’s female saints have been assembled by the National Gallery in London, as part of the first major monographic exhibition in Britain devoted to him. (The show will travel on to Paris and Chicago.) The gallery has held one fine female saint in its collection since 1903: St Margaret, in a new straw hat, with every dangling thread from her chemise portrayed. Yet, on the eve of the blockbuster, Zurbarán – who was born in the western Spanish region of Extremadura in 1598 and spent most of his 65 years in Seville – remains unfamiliar in Britain.



Saint Casilda (c1635) Credit: Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza



Saint Ursula, 1635-1640 Credit: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty Images

For hundreds of years, the majority of his paintings were cloistered in monasteries or obscure churches in Spain. A mysterious exception, the portrait series *Jacob and his Twelve Sons* hung for centuries in the bishop's dining room at Auckland Castle in County Durham, which was opened to the public only recently. Paradoxically, it took looting by the French during the Napoleonic wars and the dissolution of the Spanish monasteries in 1835 to reveal Zurbarán's paintings to a wider audience abroad.

The National Gallery (which now holds four) acquired its first in 1853 and it was there, not in Spain, that I began to discover what Zurbarán was doing. *A Cup of Water and a Rose* (acquired in 1997) depicts, on a canvas 12 inches across, a ceramic cup of water on a silver or pewter plate, on the edge of which lies a rose. Yes, it is painted with great virtuosity; you could dip a finger into the water. But that is not the point.



A Cup of Water and a Rose, 1630s Credit: The National Gallery

The picture possesses tranquillity, absolute stillness and what I would call a contemplative character. It is the epitome of what the Edinburgh University Hispanicist Jeremy Robbins identifies as the “still life aesthetic” that runs throughout Zurbarán’s work. He developed the theme in *Francisco de Zurbarán and the Fabric of the World*, published by Reaktion Books earlier this year.

At his most daring, Zurbarán attempts the impossible: to paint the invisible, the spiritual, the transcendent, the godly. Those things cannot be expressed in words, let alone in paint. So what is a painter to do? One answer is to represent the inexpressible by its opposite. So, through the most precise rendition of outward appearances Zurbarán expresses inner reality. Through the material he expresses the spiritual; through the temporal, the eternal. How else could he proceed?

“The human body is the best picture of the human soul,” wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), which Zurbarán had not, of course, read. But he did know what the contemplative saints John of the Cross or Teresa of Ávila had written in the years before his birth. All of Spain discussed their words endlessly.

In his poem *Noche Oscura* and its accompanying commentary, St John of the Cross explored the incommunicable meeting of the human with the divine, “in the happy night, in secret, when none saw me, or I beheld anything, without light or guide except for that which burned in my heart”.



Saint Ursula, 1635
Credit: Fine Art Images/Heritage Images via Getty Images

The black backgrounds to many of Zurbarán's paintings make them resemble "a dark night when a flash of lightning suddenly illuminates things and makes them clear and distinct", as St John wrote of a vision flooded with unearthly light. As an artist who spent his most productive years accepting commissions from religious houses of contemplative men and women to paint for their chapels and cloisters, Zurbarán certainly connected with such abstract attempts to capture the immaterial.

For the ascetic Carthusians of Jerez, for example, he painted *The Virgin of the Rosary* (circa 1635), which has travelled from Poznań for the current exhibition. For the strict Franciscans inspired by the alarmingly self-denying St Peter of Alcantara, he created *St Francis in Meditation* (1639), in which the saint is shown kneeling with his mouth open, vacant in contemplation, in the shadow of his cowl.



St Francis in Meditation, 1639 Credit: The National Gallery Photographic Department

For the Mercedarians (who ultimately were ready to exchange themselves for people held in slavery) he painted *St Serapion* (1628), which has returned from Hartford, Connecticut, to London, where it made such an impression in 2009 in the exhibition *The Sacred Made Real*. Serapion sleeps in death, showing few signs of his violent martyrdom at the hands of English pirates. He is upright only because his wrists are bound with ropes, but it is his unsoiled habit, the symbol of his religious vocation, that is so marvellously rendered by Zurbarán.

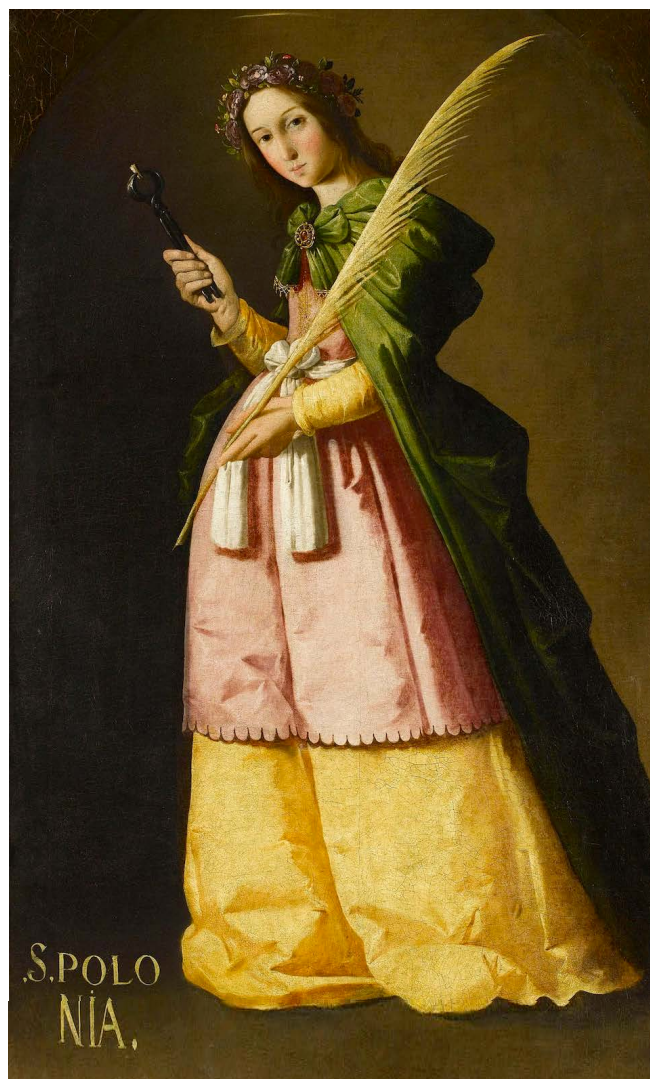
If we return our gaze from Francis or Serapion to those female saints, there is less of a temptation to regard them as fashion plates. As Robbins points out, they are not dressed in ways shown in contemporary portraiture. Some of their clothes are based on 16th-century dress, 100 years old; others are inventions by the artist. The elegance and beauty of these garments are intended to convey their virtue.



St Serapion (1628) made a strong impression in 2009 in the exhibition *The Sacred Made Real*
Credit: National Gallery

Like the male martyrs, Zurbarán's female saints conceal the horrors of their sufferings. St Apollonia, in the exhibition, wears a full lemon skirt with a faded rose overskirt and a green *sobretudo* or long wrap. Serenely, she holds a large pair of iron pliers, between the jaws of which is a single clean white tooth, the only emblem of the terrible sufferings that made her the patron saint of toothache.

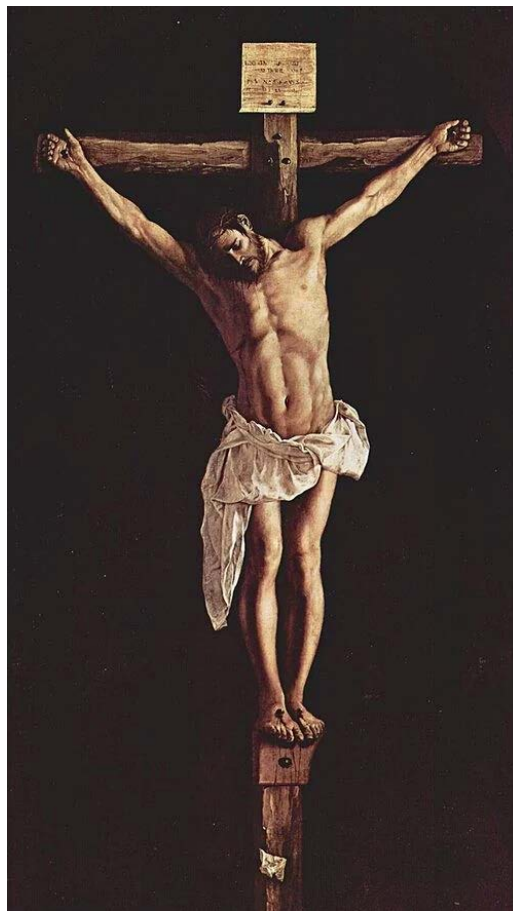
These women, whose clothes do not define the shape of their bodies, are dressed as images of saints still are in many Spanish churches, in gorgeous apparel meant not to glamorise but to honour them. Their statues thus arrayed may be carried on floats on their feast days. At the old Hieronymite monastery in Extremadura, for which Zurbarán produced a series of paintings, the statue of Our Lady of Guadalupe is kept in a room above the high altar alongside her changes of clothing. These are nothing like today's dress or, indeed, any century's. The small black figure is vested in stiff, rich, embroidered silk and cloth of gold.



Saint Apollonia, 1636–40
Credit: GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre)/Stéphane Maréchalle

Zurbarán sets about painting the dress of saints and martyrs with great virtuosity, just as he would an orange or a ceramic pot. He gives every individual a detached singularity. (As a result, in his larger works featuring several figures each can feel awkwardly unconnected.) Like the still lifes, the portraits of saints are often given a black background so that the viewer is obliged to focus on the figures. They are not sunk in gloom, but rather brightly lit, allowing the painter to exercise his genius for colour.

The earliest work to be signed and dated by Zurbarán was a crucifixion from 1627. The 17th-century painter and writer on art, Antonio Palomino, said that when he first saw it, in a dim setting with its black background, he mistook it for a polychrome sculpture. Zurbarán had in fact been commissioned three years earlier to produce such a sculpted crucifixion, and in the contract the Spanish word for polychroming the sculpture was *encarnación* – incarnation, the same word used of God becoming human flesh in Nazareth.

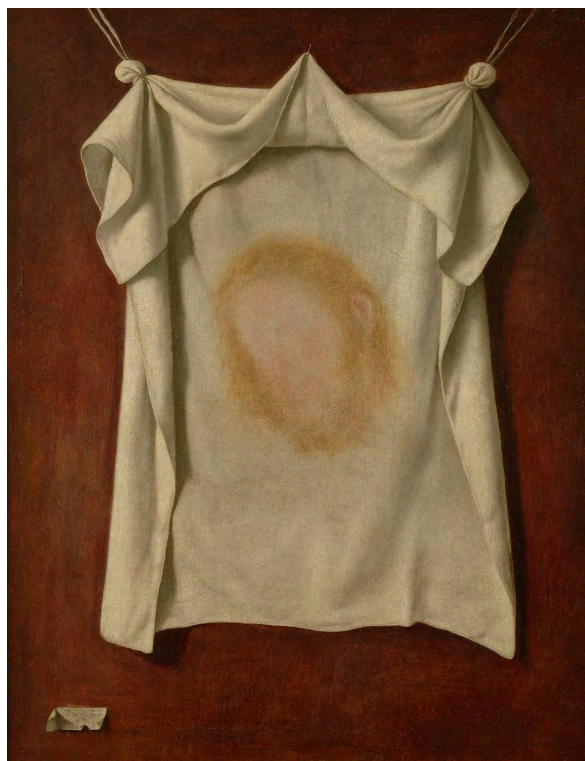


Christ on the Cross, 1627

At the same time, Zurbarán was no hermit. He could make a living from painting for religious orders and churches because in his heyday, Seville, his adopted home, was one of the richest cities in the world. (Between 1503 and 1660, six million troy ounces of gold from the New World passed through it). With a population of 130,000, it was also among Europe's largest cities; by the middle of the 17th century, it had 45 monasteries, 28 convents and 118 main churches.

We do not have Zurbarán's thoughts in writing, but we know he was married three times, and widowed twice. The plague of 1649, which killed half the population of Seville, also took his son Juan, four of whose still lifes appear alongside his father's work in the current exhibition. In the years that followed, with Seville slipping from prosperity as its port silted up, Zurbarán found fewer commissions from thriving monasteries and turned instead to small-scale paintings for private devotion.

One late work, signed in 1658, is a painting of a painting – or rather of an image not made by human hands. *The Veil of Veronica* (borrowed from Valladolid) presents the faint mark of the face of Jesus on the kerchief with which the female saint was supposed to have wiped away his sweat as he walked to his death carrying the cross. Zurbarán's painting is a *trompe l'oeil*, made more convincing by a scrap of paper with his signature, painted as though it were pasted to the backing board of the veil.



The Veil of Veronica, 1658 Credit: Museo Nacional de Escultura

That picture, like the superlative *Agnus Dei* borrowed from the Prado, would have been regarded by its owner quietly at prayer. Like icons, such paintings served as windows into heaven, making the unseen present. In our overheated days of uncertainty, a vision of stillness is just what we thirst for. All we need to do is look at a Zurbarán and keep quiet for five minutes.

Zurbarán is at the National Gallery, London WC2 from May 2 - August 23