

The only church in town

Cian O'Neill gets seasonally religious

The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600 - 1700
The National Gallery, London until 24 January 2010

Untenanted is how heaven looks. Many western nations have not kept faith with Church Roman or Anglican and notwithstanding the many good reasons for this turning away it has left what Larkin termed, '[T]he need to be more serious', which, surprised in oneself but once, may become an almost tangible, nagging anti-presence just at the periphery of consciousness. One might term it the 'black matter' of the modern soul (such soul, that is, as we any of us are allowed in a world cling-filmed by commerce), and how it is to be addressed too few modern artists seem inclined to properly contemplate. This is not solely explicable on the basis of the church being the only real client around for a talented artist. What the Church and its faith represented was just as important. Simply stated, and we shall leave the history there, Christianity was dominant in Europe by the High Middle Ages and the faith which it formed gave not only people but artists something to contemplate and revere – a ves-

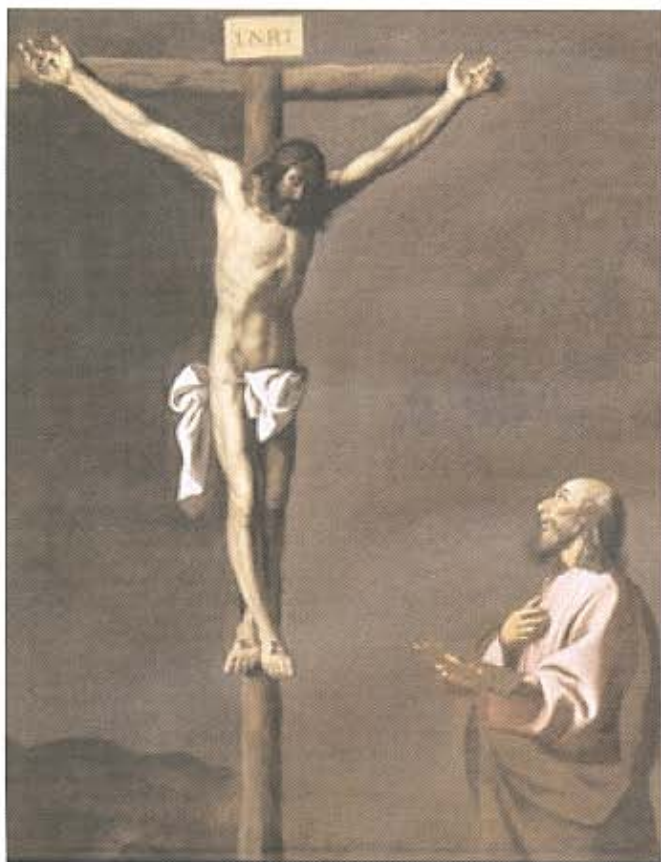
sel or form within which our human compulsions could meet. An exhibition of c17th Spanish painting and sculpture has just opened in London's National Gallery of such 'vessel-forms' wrought of human hand and what with the artworks fervent Catholicism, and its run over Christmas, this exhibition might almost be classed as 'seasonal'. Whether or not it brings in the numbers, the work has every right to be praised.

That this is one of the best curated shows that the gallery has ever mounted is almost beyond debate. It is lucid in its conception and delivery, and its almost tarty-apposite location within the subterranean Sainsbury Wing of the gallery fits as right as a crow on a crag. One leaves the trashing wind about Trafalgar Square behind, traverses a vaulted hall, wends down

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two wide flights of stairs, down and round and through to a dead end, as into a crypt. There one finds waiting six darkly coloured, very strategically-spotlit rooms of life-size painted carven figures / busts and canvases, sub-thematically variegated, showing the dead or dying Christ, the Virgin Mary and/or associated saints, monks and martyrs, specifically created to look real and so communicate faith in the most direct way by showing now agony, now ecstasy, and a whole lot of theistic ardour in between. As in Baghdad, God is absent from view, but God never was the face of the franchise. The star has always been Jesus. His dying for humanity is the key of the story as he is the vessel-form, the embodiment of god and humanity and the dilemma of life (that it exists only through relation to death, which contra-distinction needs must, the relation not being balanced but active, be periodically resolved through things being born or dying). Jesus was also a young man strung near-naked on a crucifix and one doesn't need to work on Grub Street to appreciate that as very good, if gory copy.

So Room One gets straight to it with two works by Francisco Pacheco [1564-1644] and Juan de Mesa [1583-1627], both sculpted Christ figures hung like blanched venison from their crosses; and a very reasonable facsimile of the severed, 'Head of John the Baptist' [c.1625] again by Mesa. Then one sees the first of several works by the most inexplicably under-celebrated of all Spanish painters, one Francisco de Zurbarán [1598-1664], his, 'Saint Luke contemplating the Crucifixion' [c.1630] is unlike his great work being almost jocund, what with the saint looking actually quite pleased to be stood before an executed man-god. Luke holds a palette and brush too, the better to make a note-sketch of it, so make of that what you will, though the cadaver itself seems aghast, having turned ashen. The next work, by Alonzo Cano [1601-



Saint Luke contemplating the Crucifixion by Francisco de Zurbarán

1667], depicts the 'Miracle of the Lactation', which is also quietly comical. It shows Saint Bernard praying before a statue of Mary for a sign, or spiritual refreshment. In any case, she provides some semi-skimmed from her breast in a laser-accurate jet to his lips, and some are bound to laugh. Laugh few will, however, before the adjacent Madonna by Juan Martínez Montañés [1568-1649], which shows the incredible potential of attentively handled wood and paint with its clearly-expressed volume and grace – amazing grace, indeed – each detail of the weft in the heavy mantle is there, each geometric pattern of the hem, all created using the technique then known as *estofado*. The aforementioned Pacheco worked with Montañés many times and this particular Virgin was created using the former's technique for painting flesh tones through careful layering of grounds and paint. The technique was newly refined by the Spaniards, but the practice not novel – the bas-relief stone frieze of the Parthenon, for example, was painted. Almost seeming an afterthought, a modestly beautiful canvas by Velázquez, 'The Immaculate Conception' [1618-19], hangs near the Montañés Madonna. If the figure is demure, the sky is a riot – a widescreen dream of dramatically contrasted clouds, thrown open with light and wonder.

Then come the portraits, mainly of saints, by Zurbarán, Alonso Cano [1601-1667] and Velázquez, though it is the solo and joint works by Montañés and Pacheco which most fascinate as they are of painted wood and cloth (a plain, dark tunic stiffened with glue), which cloth could be changed by the addition of grand liturgical costumes for important occasions or services. The figures are 'made-up', with eyeliner, blusher, and egg-white varnish for 'glow'. 'Saint Ignatius Loyola' [1610] has a few sequin tears creeping down his cheeks, though the effect is not, mercifully, camp. The third of these chambers of the macabre is very dark indeed, though none could complain if they did stub a toe for it holds two portraits of a rapt Saint Francis by Zurbarán which demand low light but would make of a cabin a cathedral. The smaller of the two shows the saint on his knees with skull in hand and the larger, two metres in height, shows the saint standing in an aedicule, or niche. The first is a peerless gem of the permanent collection of the National, the second on loan from the Catalan Museum in Barcelona and it is, for reasons of compositional daring, technical accomplishment and emotional impact, heart-breakingly beautiful: just a man in a cowl gazing heavenward, yes, but so very much more. Perhaps it is that we cannot see what he does, that we feel we have less cause for rapture.

Largest of all the rooms is 'Passion'-themed. It contains 'Ecce Homo' [pre-1621], by Gregorio Fernández [1576-1636]. The welts on the back of this scourged Christ were created through the removal of a layer of ground and the soaking in of reddish pigment that gave the right look of sub-cutaneous wounding. The flesh above the right hip is creased, the hair filigreed, all is verisimilitude. The 'peeled' sections of the back may be original, or simply constitute damage to the wood, but either way it is shockingly affecting and so too is the other scourged Christ by Pedro de Mena [1628-1688], which pos-

esses dazed-looking brown glass eyes, individual eyelashes, even dimpled blood droplets upon the torso, as if the crimson had just begun to dry upon this Galilean rebel under the hot mid-day sun.

These two statues are the finest here, with de Mena's 'Mater Dolorosa' [c.1673] and its tear-swimming eyes close behind, yet stealing the show again, is the final Zurbarán on display, 'Christ on the Cross' [1627]. Commissioned and specifically designed for the Dominican friary of San Pablo, Seville, it dominates this space as it surely must have that original home and it is such a texturally gorgeous study of human form that one ponders the reaction of the chaste friars, when first they saw it. If it does have more physically in common with one of Michelangelo's gigolo models than some waxen victim, yet the white cream skin contrasts with a pure black ground in a very simply cruciform pose that becomes more – a question mark in an empty space, beautiful enough to fix the eye, to fix it until the mind of the viewer slips and stands out of time, in fact stands within that empty space gazing upon this strange symbol, this almost plausible way through and out of the gloom, pouring all questions, doubts and need for meaning into this vessel, this form, until phhhfffft! – the moment slips, and the viewer once more stands outside, more quiet, more serious, and more sure still of the uncanny power in truthfully expressed [religious] art. It may be the only church left us.

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Madonna by Juan Martínez Montañés