

EVENT REVIEW

The Sacred Made Real, London National Gallery

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Keywords

Spanish polychrome sculptures, naturalism, realism

Every year during Holy Week, the Passion of Christ is re-enacted in parts of Seville, Granada, Valladolid and other regions of Spain. The ceremony involves the procession of religious polychrome sculptures on floats. Although the sculptures are not relics, they are considered to be sacred in their symbolism and realism. Many are life-size, and their carriage on floats that sway from side to side adds to the naturalism of the sculptures. Locals and visitors gather from near and far to witness the spectacles in celebration of Easter. These polychrome sculptures hail from the Baroque era of Spanish art and many of them were on show recently at *The Sacred Made Real* exhibition at the National Gallery in London.

The Sacred Made Real was an exhibition of seventeenth-century Spanish painting and polychrome sculptures that was held at the National Gallery in London from 21 October 2009 – 24 January 2010, and was jointly organized by the National Gallery and the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Works in the exhibition focused on scenes from the Passion of Christ, the Immaculate Conception, and the religious experiences of saints.

In seventeenth century Spain a form of realism emerged that was consistent with the objectives of the Counter-Reformation. Painters and sculptors worked together to create a naturalism that would make the rep-

resentations as real as possible. In painting this was created by the nuanced palettes and attention to detail. The potential for illusionism was arguably greater in sculpture. Sculptors such as Gregorio Fernández and Pedro de Mena used glass eyes, glass tears, ivory teeth and human hair to increase the sense of naturalism. They took care to convey the shadows and marks on the body. The sense of brute realism was also used to articulate the suffering of Christ, which is demonstrated by the presence of wounds, with blood spilling out of them and congealing, and the pallid expression on the face of Christ. The gore was meant to shock, and in turn to inspire devotion in the viewer, as well as imparting a sense of direct realism. When we look at these examples we feel as if we are witnessing the events firsthand and are in the presence of the sacred.

The exhibition was critical for three reasons: its focus on realism and not idealism, which is unusual for the tone of a whole exhibition; the inclusion of polychrome sculptures, which were hitherto neglected in scholarship because they were made of wood and not the classical materials of bronze or marble. The third reason is the exhibition of paintings and sculptures together, where neither was to be regarded in an ancillary position to the other—both were regarded of equal importance. The audacious move to position sculptures alongside painting in an exhibition of religious art gave the viewer a rare opportunity to see such work. It represented a visual challenge to the viewer because the relationship between the painting and sculpture is not distinct. Many of the paintings emulate sculptural effects. And, in turn, the success of the sculpture was determined by the realism of the painted effects of the face, skin tone and other qualities.

The work was divided between six rooms. Following the influence of Caravaggio, the paintings were characterized by dramatic contrasts of dark and light. Because the rooms were so darkly lit and the walls were black, the paintings seemed to jut out of the woodwork. Especially in the case of the Crucifixion paintings by Zurbarán and Pacheco, where the background of the painting was also in black, the striking feature was the figure on the Cross. The sculptures occupied the entirety of the space in the room. People walked round the artworks silently, looking intently at the sorrowful gazes on the faces of Christ and the saints. The subjects of the “work” of reflection, sorrow, and ecstasy, were private encounters that the figure had with the divine, and to be able to behold this was reverential. The progression from room to room corresponded with the deepening of spiritual understanding. Rooms 1 and 2 contained a broad range of works illustrating the field of work. Rooms 3 to 6 took specific themes as their

focus: room 3, the meditations and religious revelation of Saint Francis; room 4, scenes from the Passion; room 5, scenes of dying and sorrow; and room 6, the apotheosis of religious experience. It was gravely described as *Sala de Profundis: A Room for the Dead*, and showed the poignant martyrdom of Serapion as he passed from life to death. Journeying from room to room, the viewer became more sombre and contemplative. Even if you were not a believer, it was very difficult to detach yourself from the intensity of pain and suffering.

The experience of looking at art is so varied in contemporary culture. Exhibition spaces are not as uniform as they once were, and the experience of seeing artwork cannot be generalized. However, more often than not, one is still able to acknowledge the aesthetic aspects of the experience. What seemed most peculiar here was the experience of enclosure that the work generated. I had an overwhelming sense when experiencing the work that I was looking at religious statues and images that were in a religious chapel rather than in an exhibition. This corroborates the Directors' view, expressed in the catalogue, where it is said of the sculpture that "much of it is still, to use the anthropologist's term, 'in worship'" (Bray 2009, 7). The wall plaques and external information was minimized and the lighting so dim as only to draw attention to the work. The viewer was cast into the role of witness, where we bore witness to extreme sights, such as the rapture of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (in Ribalta's *Christ embracing Saint Bernard of Clairvaux*, 1624-7) and the moment when Christ is presented to the Jews in Fernández's *Ecce Homo* (before 1621). The aesthetic effects enhanced the spiritual reading. This transformative experience was disarming because the viewer is left deliberating on how to read the work. The curator, Xavier Bray (Bray 2009, 17), describes how "the hyper-real sculptures made the sacred truly palpable", and hence "to approach this sculpture was to feel that one was truly in the presence of the dead Christ." People alternately leant in to examine the artistry and then withdrew in reverence and awe at the spectacle.

The startling sense of realism is articulated in all the exhibits, but for the purposes of this review I want to isolate two examples to comment on the extent of illusionism.

This first example is Zurbarán's *Christ on the Cross* (1627). The body of Christ emerges starkly from the black background. The lack of shadow in the background dramatizes the presence of the body on the Cross. The right side of the body of Christ is deep in shadow, whilst the other side is lit and the edge of Christ's body is delineated sharply against the black-

ness. The feet are nailed in the same place. Although we see the Cross face on, the body of Christ is slumped on the right side of the Cross. This is conveyed by the deep shadow on that side of the body and in the areas between the legs. Bray (2009, 30) conveys how “Zurbarán was attempting to emulate in paint the palpability of a wooden polychrome sculpture” and comments on the sculpturally-rendered loincloth as further evidence of this.

The second example is Gregorio Fernández’s *Ecce Homo* (before 1621). Fernández shows a life-size standing Christ as he is brought before the people. His vulnerability is conveyed by the pitiful expression on his face. The viewer recoils in horror as he or she walks around the figure and sees the scourged flesh.

As well as inspiring awe and reverence, on a more sinister level the exhibition reminded me of a horror show, such as in the Chamber of Horrors in Madame Tussaud’s. Viewers felt a sense of impending doom—not in an eschatological sense, but in the feeling of being weighted down by suffering and the sorrow that ensues from it. There is no mention of the joy of the Incarnation, or the hope granted by the Resurrection. The mood is sombre and we are looking at artworks which explore suffering, sacrifice and death. The exhibits here were not gory in a gratuitous sense. Seeing the brutalized body in the round is shocking, and the use of lifelike elements, such as glass eyes, as well as the sheen on the sculptures, was deeply unnerving. This level of realism represented a contrast with the idealization of sixteenth century Renaissance work, which focused on idealization, or on exaggeration, in the case of *maniera* work.

This exhibition of sixteen paintings and sixteen polychrome sculptures side-by-side, showcased religious work of monumental significance. Although the work of Velazquez and Zurbarán is known internationally, much of the work is largely unknown outside Spain. The polychrome sculptures of the seventeenth century are venerated in monasteries and churches in Spain but have never been the subject of a major exhibition. The dialogue between painting and sculpture created a religious fervour, and is a reminder of why Spain is regarded as a Catholic centre in Europe. It succeeded in *making the sacred real*, which was bewildering for a contemporary audience: they are taken aback by the typological uncertainty of the work (as well as the artistic “excesses” of Counter-Reformation Catholicism).

We ask ourselves the following question: are we looking at art that *becomes* religious in its painstaking hyperrealism, or at religious works that become art in virtue of their aesthetic prowess? During Holy Week this

ambiguity is seen as the work is paraded. And it is also well known that the practice of praying in front of sculptures and paintings led some religious figures to experience a mystical union with them. The direction of transformation—whether we are looking at art that become religious or vice versa—is perhaps less important than the certainty of this transformation, which indeed constitutes the power of this exhibition.

Reference

Bray, X. 2009. *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Paintings and Sculpture 1600–1700*. London: National Gallery Company.