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Zurbarán at the Frick

by Karen Wilkin

On “Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons, Paintings from Auckland Castle” at the Frick Collection.

Painting, I’m told, is out of favor in academic circles. Today’s art history students regard the medium as patriarchal, imperialist, colonialist, irrelevant, and racist, among other terms of opprobrium, because its perpetrators and patrons were largely (capitalist) dead white males. Young scholars gravitate toward the art of Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and Mesoamerica, often viewing it “through the lens of” feminism, gender politics, queer theory, pure Marxism-Leninism, and all the rest of it. That most people specializing in these subjects are not themselves Asian, African, or Latin American is not seen as a problem. Quite the contrary, it seems. I’m told that the African-born professor of African art at one prestigious university is disliked by his African-American students; he’s an aristocrat and perceived as “snobby.”

In this climate, the recent, spectacular exhibition at the Frick Collection, “Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons, Paintings from Auckland Castle,” thirteen life-size, vertical “portraits” of the Old Testament family by Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), a leading light of seventeenth-century Seville, could be seen as “deeply problematic.”¹ There’s the unavoidable fact that we’re dealing with oil paint on canvas, with the resulting works made still more unpalatable by having been created by a dead white Spanish male and his dead white male assistants. And it gets worse. Though nothing is known of the history of this particular series of Jacob and his sons before it turned up in London in the eighteenth century, the high quality of the paintings makes it evident that they were commissioned by a wealthy client. That the subject points to a connection with Latin America might be perceived as a plus, but given the period in which the paintings were made, it’s the wrong kind of Latin America. The presumed provenance, far from making the works more interesting to modish young art historians, exacerbates the problem. Groups of the patriarch and his sons, the founders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel, such as the cycle at the Frick, were popular in vice-regal South America in the seventeenth century since the indigenous people of the region were thought to be descendants of the Lost Tribes. (No, I don’t know how that idea was supported.) It goes without saying that the commissioners of such groups of paintings were not the indigenous people of the region, but their colonial oppressors, bent on imposing Catholicism on the inhabitants of the territories they controlled. So in addition to the inherent difficulties of being

made with paint in the first place, for a rich patron, the paintings are further compromised by their association with ecclesiastical imperialism, exploitation of native populations, and more. It's a lot to contend with.

Yet for those of us willing to overlook such putative taints and concentrate on other attributes, the thirteen canvases of "Jacob and His Twelve Sons," all executed *ca.* 1640–45, are fascinating, frankly gorgeous, and, like all of Zurbarán's work, slightly quirky. Unlike the majority of his seventeenth-century Spanish contemporaries, Zurbarán had little formal training and less grounding in the principles of Italian Renaissance painting. He is described as essentially self-taught, which makes the suave simplification of his forms, the geometric mass of his figures, and the robust individuality of his faces all the more remarkable. Zurbarán rarely painted Old Testament subjects, but here, at least, an unusual theme seems to have brought out the best in him. Each of the thirteen figures in "Jacob and His Twelve Sons" is a particular person. Each is named, in the lower left corner of each painting, and everything about each figure—his stance, his relation to the viewer, his clothing and footwear, and the objects or creatures that accompany him—gradually reveals itself as having been dictated by the so-called "Blessing of Jacob," in the Book of Genesis. Jacob, the son of Isaac and grandson of Abraham, fathered twelve sons by his two wives, Leah and Rachel, and his concubines, Bilhah and Zilpah; each son founded one of the Tribes of Israel. The source of the series' complex iconography, Jacob's "blessings," is the patriarch's deathbed descriptions of the essential qualities of each son and his prophecies of their future and of the tribes they would beget, presented as provocative metaphors.

A joint project of the Frick, the Meadows Museum (Dallas, Texas), and the Auckland Project (County Durham, England), "Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons, Paintings from Auckland Castle" was organized by the Frick's senior curator, Susan Grace Galassi; Mark A. Roglán, the director of the Meadows; Amanda Dotseth, a fellow at the Meadows; and Edward Payne, the Auckland Project's senior curator of Spanish art. The exhibition is accompanied by a handsome, copiously illustrated catalogue with essays by an impressive roster of scholars and information about the paintings found during technical examination by Claire Barry, the director of conservation at the Kimbell Art Museum.

As installed in the Frick's ample long gallery in the east wing of the building, the somber, richly colored series surrounds us, with the figures forming a lively procession, facing this way and that, looking back or confronting us to create subsidiary rhythms within the whole. Helpful labels give us the biblical references. Jacob turns towards us, leaning on a stick, as befits his great age. Reuben, the first born, faces us, holding a pillar, a symbol of strength; his downcast eyes signal that because he slept with one of his father's concubines, his tribe didn't amount to much. Simeon, known for violence and dressed in animal skins, gazes at us over his shoulder, holding a sword and a staff. Levi, the source of the priestly class, reverses Simeon's pose; but their different roles and Levi's high status are announced in his rich ceremonial garments and the incense burner he holds. Judah, the progenitor of kings, stares us down, wearing a crown and holding a scepter, splendid in a fur-trimmed brocade robe; a remarkably un-leonine lion slides in from the left. Zebulun, described by

Jacob as “settling by the shores of the sea,” is dressed as a sailor, holding an anchor and a bargepole, against what may or may not be an expanse of ocean; his snappy striped trousers, it is suggested, recall South American textiles, reinforcing the series’ supposed connection with the New World. Issachar, a shepherd described as “a strong donkey,” strides across the canvas, dressed in a simple robe and shown in profile; a sweet-faced donkey sticks his head into the scene. Dan, the judge, is seen in rear profile, in a fantastic hat, holding a rod entwined with snakes, a reference to Jacob’s calling him “a viper along the path.” Gad is a soldier with an impressive moustache, a sword, a breastplate, and a club. Asher, a very prosperous farmer, in a surprisingly elegant tunic of overlapping scales, a rich scarf, and devastatingly chic booties, looms in profile above a landscape of neat wheatfields, holding a shepherd’s crook and a wonderfully rendered wicker basket of bread. Naphtali, a more modest farmer, is wrapped in a cloak that leaves one shoulder bare; he balances a spade on his other shoulder. Joseph, the beloved son who inspired such envy among his brothers that they tried to do him in, is, not surprisingly, dressed as opulently as his brother Judah, the begetter of kings, and, like Judah, faces us, although less directly; Joseph’s sandals, with open toes, bows, and what appear to be richly worked boot tops, would create a sensation in the shoe department of Barneys. Benjamin, the youngest, described by his father as “a ravenous wolf,” is the most casually, jauntily posed of the brothers. He turns back to look at us, with one arm folded behind his back, the better to display the nifty bows that punctuate his fine costume. He holds what we are told is a wolf on a chain, although the head of the black beast, seen in profile on the right, really looks more like that of a Doberman Pinscher. Each figure stands tall against a large expanse of sky, with a narrow band of landscape, each very different, some with buildings, some with ruins, some pristine, below.

At the Frick, we can fully appreciate all this delicious complexity, along with the interplay of poses, colors, and patterns, since all thirteen canvases have been brought together for the first time in 260 years. Until now, twelve of the paintings have resided in Auckland Castle, formerly one of the two official residences of the wealthy Prince Bishops of Durham. Richard Trevor, who held this powerful position in the eighteenth century, was, we are told, as passionate about art and architecture as he was dedicated to his spiritual duties. He was also a supporter of a short-lived bill granting rights to Britain’s foreign-born Jews, a step towards equality and inclusion that was soon reversed because of public hostility. Trevor’s sympathy for Britain’s Jews is thought to have influenced his purchase of “Jacob and His Twelve Sons” in 1756—or rather Jacob and His Eleven Sons; he was outbid on Benjamin, who went elsewhere. Trevor had Benjamin copied and installed the group in the dining room of Auckland Castle, where, according to the exhibition’s informative catalogue, the cycle “displayed” the Bishop’s support for religious tolerance and open-mindedness. Trevor’s twelve Zurbaráns and the copy remain at Auckland Castle, which has been acquired from the Church of England by the financier and philanthropist Jonathan Ruffer and is being turned into a heritage center and museum. The current restoration of Auckland Castle has permitted Trevor’s twelve paintings to travel before returning to their original home. Benjamin, reunited with his brothers at the Frick, usually lives in Grimsthorpe Castle, Lincolnshire, and has been generously allowed to join the tour by Lady Willoughby de Eresby.

The thirteen canvases are obviously studio works, often based on prints by other artists, but recent technical analysis by Claire Barry revealed much evidence of Zurbarán's own hand. There's certainly no lack of invention in the panoply of poses, costumes, settings, and props that embody the biblical characterizations of the sons and their futures, even though a chapter in the catalogue tracks the sources of many of the cycle's basic conceptions, such as the stances of each of the figures, to images by Northern printmakers such as Martin Schongauer, Albrecht Dürer, and Jacques de Gheyn II. Clearly, Zurbarán was turning out a product, albeit a luxury product, but thirteen life-size canvases to be completed as a group was obviously a major undertaking, not something to be executed at leisure, on spec. The studio was fulfilling the commission as efficiently as possible, relying on known solutions to the challenge of showing thirteen different figures in complicated contrapposto, profile, or facing us. Yet it's also evident that Zurbarán and his studio reveled in the opportunities for subtly varying those poses and for thinking up exotic and wildly assorted clothing for ancient Jewish kings and shepherds, farmers and warriors, sailors and priests. The individuality of each figure, as well as his otherness as an Old Testament Jew from the distant past, is underscored by a dazzling array of headdresses, footwear, cloaks, patterned fabrics, and trimmings. The range of headgear, from elaborate turbans to artfully draped scarves to simple caps, and the variety of footwear, from minimalist sandals, with or without backs, worn with or without socks, to sleek low boots, not to mention the different cuts and embellishments of the brothers' costumes, should make the exhibition a must-see for all fashionistas. (The sandals and boots, especially, look remarkably current.) And that's not to ignore the engaging animals and the notably various landscapes we glimpse behind each of the figures. There's an enormous amount to look at. The Bishop may have valued the essential meaning of "Jacob and His Twelve Sons" as a celebration of the history of Judaism and its concomitant affirmation of his support for Britain's Jewish population, but the thirteen large canvases he installed in his dining room at Auckland Castle had many other merits, as well.

We envy the Bishop his dining room decorations. We can appreciate the theological implications of the series and admire their function as emblems of a broad-minded tolerance of difference. We can applaud the Bishop's using the works as tacit propaganda for a position he evidently espoused with deep conviction. But what pure joy it must have been to be able to study these wonderfully coherent and diverse paintings at each meal, discovering their likeness and unlikeness, their repetitions and variations, getting to know each of the brothers as an individual, and noticing all the lavish detail of their presentation.

¹ "Zurbarán: Jacob and His Twelve Sons, Paintings from Auckland Castle" opened at the Frick Collection, New York, on January 31 and remains on view through April 22, 2018.

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