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British art and collecting

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Van Eyck in Ghent | Berruguete in Washington | George IV in London | Paula Rego in Edinburgh



Exhibitions

There is a persistent belief that Jan was a faithful copyist of nature. Having developed unequalled powers of observation and unmatched skills in reproducing nature in a completely convincing way, he seems to have concluded that he could distort natural appearances for his own purposes. As mentioned above, he gives the sitters in his portraits narrow shoulders and short arms. His humans are often far too big for their surroundings and he depicts people and angels on several different scales. In the Ghent *Annunciation*, Gabriel and the Virgin are contained under an extremely low ceiling, placed there to support the prophets and sibyls, who are half the size of the angel and the Virgin. They are smaller than the statues of the two Sts John, themselves rather smaller than the donors, who are slightly less than life-size.⁹ The large-faced, narrow shouldered Ghent donors are cramped into their narrow niches, which are barely plausible spaces for them to occupy. At the same time, Jan introduced hardly noticeable spiders' webs spun across the visible corners of both niches.¹⁰ At once extravagant in his efforts to introduce credible details and highly economical in all other parts of his pictures, he painted spontaneously and at great speed, with delight and with verve. The work of his imitators, even the most accomplished among them, looks laboured in comparison. Although it is relatively easy to distinguish Jan's work from that of his followers, it is less easy to classify their productions, especially when they are painting pastiches based on Jan's works. The exhibition provides an unrepeatable opportunity to make such classifications; but, much more importantly, it offers a unique chance to observe carefully and at close quarters the genius of Jan van Eyck.

1 For the restoration, see H. Dubois: 'The Art of Conservation XV. The conservation history of the Ghent Altarpiece', *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE*, 160 (2018), pp.754–65.

2 The dates and attributions given in this review are those assigned by the curators of the exhibition.

3 'Closer to Van Eyck', <http://closertovaneyck.kikirpa.be/>, accessed 5th March 2020.

4 The drawing was discovered by the French art historian Louis Dimier (1865–1943), who bought it, apparently early in 1921, 'chez Parsons', 45 Brompton Road, London, a business that had been inherited by the brothers Henry Edwin George Parsons and

Frederick John Parsons; see L. Dimier: 'Les Primitifs français, V, Règnes de Charles VII et de Louis XI', *Gazette des beaux-arts* 6, no.20 (1938), pp.81–102, at p.94. It was purchased in 1992 for the Lisbon archive from the dealer Vasco Teles da Gama. E. Dhanens: *Hubert and Jan van Eyck*, Antwerp 1980, p.133, did not believe that the drawing was a copy after Jan's lost portrait; but compare K. Bauch: 'Bildnisse des Jan van Eyck (1961)', in *idem: Studien zur Kunstgeschichte*, Berlin 1967, pp.79–122; C. Sterling: 'Jan van Eyck avant 1432', *Revue de l'art*, 33 (1976), pp.7–82, at pp.33–34; B. Fransen: 'Jan van Eyck and the portraiture of his predecessors', in S. Kemperdick and F. Lammertse, eds: exh. cat. *The Road to Van Eyck*, Rotterdam (Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen) 2012, pp.76–79.

5 G. du Fresne de Beaucourt, ed.: *Chronique de Mathieu d'Escouchy (Société de l'Histoire de France)*, Paris 1863–64, II, p.226; repeated in H. Beaune and J.-J. Maulbon d'Arbaumont, eds: *Mémoires d'Olivier de La Marche (Société de l'Histoire de France)*, Paris 1883–88, II, p.372.

6 S. Kemperdick: 'Early texts on some portraits by Jan van Eyck', in C. Currie et al., eds: *Van Eyck Studies, Papers Presented at the Eighteenth Symposium for the Study of Underdrawing and Technology in Painting, Brussels, 19–21 September 2012*, Paris, Leuven and Bristol CT 2017, pp.310–24, at pp.310–13.

7 M. Martens, T.-H. Borcherdt, J. Dumolyn, J. De Smet and F. Van Dam, eds: *Van Eyck, An Optical Revolution*, Veurne and Ghent 2020.

8 Exhibition guide: M. Depoorter and L. Van Den Abeele: *Van Eyck, An Optical Revolution*. 112 pp. with numerous col. ills. (Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Ghent, 2020), €15. ISBN 9-7890-829713-8.

9 M. Postec and G. Steyaert: 'The Van Eycks' creative process. The paintings from (under)drawing to the final touch in paint', in B. Fransen and C. Stroo, eds: *The Ghent Altarpiece, Research and Conservation of the Exterior* (Contributions to the Study of the Flemish Primitives, CSFP 14), Brussels 2020, pp.194–247, at p.234.

10 *Ibid.* p.238.

Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain

Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas
29th March–26th July

by PAUL JOANNIDES

To consider mounting an exhibition devoted to Alonso Berruguete (c.1488–1561) in the United States, where his work is little known, was courageous but, fortune favouring the bold, it has succeeded triumphantly.¹ At the National Gallery of Art, Washington (closed 17th February), where it was seen by this reviewer, the show concentrated on Berruguete's multi-figure, multi-media masterpiece, the *retablo* made for the high altar of the church of S. Benito el Real, Valladolid, in 1526–33. Between 1835 and 1881, the *retablo* was dismantled and its elements were taken to the Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid.

5. *Sacrifice of Isaac*, by Alonso Berruguete. 1526–33. Polychromed wood with gilding, height 89 cm. (Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid; exh. Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas; photograph Javier Muñoz and Paz Pastor).

Although only a selection of the sculptures could be included, the range of works Berruguete created for the *retablo* was fully represented: figures from four of its five levels, one of the gables, a pair of putto reliefs, a powerfully plastic roundel and one of the painted panels. Also shown was the *Adoration of the Magi* from the *retablo* in Santiago Apóstol, Valladolid, of the late 1530s, in which Berruguete's forms become broader and more opulent. His other great installation in the choir of Toledo Cathedral, well illustrated and discussed in an essay by Manuel Arias Martínez, can only be experienced *in situ*.

Occupying just two rooms, the display at the National Gallery of Art established Berruguete unequivocally as one of the sixteenth century's





greatest masters. In energy and spatial inventiveness, crispness and tension of forms, command of expressive emphasis and acute characterisation, his work has very few parallels in emotional intensity. He studied the statuary and reliefs of Donatello and gained intimate knowledge of Michelangelo's work in different media, which he had encountered by 1508. Like theirs, his imagination was three-dimensional and figures designed for niches, such as his *Sacrifice of Isaac* (Fig. 5), in which the father's agony exceeds the son's, are even more satisfying seen in the round. He was also a master of silhouette: at the top of the *retablo*, the figures of the Virgin and St John witnessing the Crucifixion rise in a spiritual communion towards the haggard yet powerfully muscled Christ. Like Michelangelo, Berruguete could make his figures float.

Admittedly, some of Berruguete's later works can be routine and involve extensive studio participation. But it was misjudged to evoke the collaborative nature of his production in a wall panel in the second room, for nothing on display fell below the highest standards or invited questioning. In executing the S. Benito *retablo*, Berruguete's control was absolute, his emotional and technical

6. *Salomé*, here identified as Judith, by Alonso Berruguete. c.1514–17. Oil on panel, 87.5 by 71 cm. (Gallerie degli Uffizi, Florence; exh. Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas; Bridgeman Images).

7. *Ecce Homo*, by Alonso Berruguete. c.1524. Polychromed wood with gilding, height 146 cm. (Museo Nacional de Escultura, Valladolid; exh. Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas; photograph Javier Muñoz and Paz Pastor).

presence undiluted, resulting in some of the most affecting sculptures of the sixteenth century.

The first room pivoted on Berruguete's astonishing *Ecce Homo* (Fig. 7) from the early 1520s, elongated and fragile with crossed calves and a stiff angular cloak that El Greco must have noticed. The *Ecce Homo* fronted a neat fictive façade containing a selection of the *retablo*'s sculptures and the painting of St Matthew, loosely inspired by Agostino Veneziano's prints of the Evangelists after Raphael, published in 1518, the year Berruguete left Italy. Other works by Spaniards were displayed to set a context: a small and beautiful *St James* by Gil de Siloe (1489–93; Met Cloisters, New York); a relief in walnut of the Lamentation (1520; private collection) by Bartolomé Ordoñez, of which an unpublished variant in marble is currently on the London art market; and a marble statuette by Ordoñez of *St Sebastian* (private collection; ex-catalogue) which, *pace* the label, is unrelated to Michelangelo's *Dying slave*. Among the paintings were an *Adoration of the Magi* by the Master of Sigüenza (c.1519; Meadows Museum) and a Weydenesque *Virgin and Child enthroned* by Alonso's father, Pedro (c.1500, Museo de San Isidoro, Los Orígenes de Madrid). However, there were no Italian works – a Rosso Fiorentino would have been welcome company for Berruguete's so-called *Salomé* (Fig. 6), which should surely be identified as Judith displaying Holofernes' head on her return to Bethulia. The rolled-up sleeve is a giveaway, and the severed head rests on a Jewish prayer shawl, like the one about to cover Holofernes' head in Michelangelo's fresco in the Sistine Chapel. Some ten drawings by Berruguete were also shown, one of which, *Job* (?) (c.1525; Art Institute of Chicago; no.D8), based on Giovanni Francesco Rustici (1474–1554), is preparatory for the *retablo*.

A recently rediscovered alabaster relief of the *Lamentation* (private collection) placed at the entrance to room two was dated 1540–50, although when Arias Martínez published it he dated it 1520–30.² It might be even earlier; as he noted the *Virgin and Christ* is based on an engraving of the *pietà* by

Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael, and the left-hand group is as tightly pyramidal as Raphael's *Canigiani Holy Family* (1507; Alte Pinakothek, Munich), a compositional type that Berruguete did not pursue in Spain.

The accompanying publication is not a catalogue but a collection of essays with a list of exhibits, not all of which are illustrated, plus a summary catalogue of the artist's drawings. Although this is now common practice it seems regrettable, since detailed



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entries would have encouraged the contributors to explore particular objects and themes more deeply. The eleven essays cover Berruguete's life and career, his techniques, influences on him and his draughtsmanship. One intriguing issue addressed by C.D. Dickerson is whether Berruguete became a sculptor only on his return to Spain or carved sculptures while in Italy. None is known from the Italian period but early sculptural activity is not improbable; there was considerable production of wood sculpture in Florence in the early cinquecento.

The book's main shortcoming is in the authors' relative unfamiliarity with Italian work. A discussion of Berruguete's prolonged engagement with Rosso would have been helpful (the head of the Virgin in the *Crucifixion* from the S. Benito *retablo* is intensely Rossoesque) and his interest in Raphael deserves more attention. In the treatment of Berruguete and Michelangelo an opportunity was lost, for their relationship was much closer than the contributors appreciate. Thus, Berruguete's study (c. 1512–17; Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia; cat. no.D2) of the Sistine *Daniel* was made at eye-level and cannot have been drawn from the chapel's floor. This section of the vault was under way in 1510, when Berruguete is recorded in Rome, and he must have mounted the *ponte*, perhaps to assist Michelangelo with minor tasks. He certainly made other copies of this area: the *Ignudo* cited in the figure of Isaac of the *Abraham and Isaac* is that to the left above *Daniel*, and, as Arias Martínez notes, the gables from the S. Benito *retablo* are taken from Michelangelo's severies.

But more exciting than Berruguete's engagement with Michelangelo's frescos in the Sistine Chapel is his knowledge of unexecuted designs by Michelangelo: the S. Benito *John the Evangelist* is based on Michelangelo's drawing (Musée du Louvre, Paris) for the same apostle in the series of apostles he began for Florence Cathedral in 1503 and other statues from the *retablo* may also follow lost ideas for those figures.³ Berruguete also knew some of Michelangelo's studies for the tomb of Julius II: his *Sr Sebastian* (private

collection),⁴ follows a model for a slave known in a bronze relict cast in the Museo Poldi Pezzoli, Milan, and the structure of Michelangelo's 1505 *modello* for the tomb (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) is adopted in Berruguete's *retablo* of c.1550 in S. Ursula, Toledo. Especially interesting is Berruguete's drawing (c.1520–30; no.D25; not exhibited), which records a lost study by Michelangelo for a group in the *Martyrdom of the 10,000* (another copy of this group, much closer to Michelangelo technically, is in the Hamburger Kunsthalle, and copies of two other groups are known).⁵ Michelangelo's drawings for the mass martyrdom no doubt informed what Jonathan Brown calls Berruguete's 'encyclopedia of agony' (p.9) and his access to them indicates that he was for a period very close to the master. Consequently, Berruguete had a more profound understanding of Michelangelo's sculptural ideals than any of his Italian contemporaries.

1 Catalogue: *Alonso Berruguete: First Sculptor of Renaissance Spain*. Edited by C.D. Dickerson III and Mark McDonald with essays by Manuel Arias Martínez, Daphne Barbour, Jonathan Brown, Richard L. Kagan, Wendy Sepponen and Julia M. Vaquez. 230 pp. incl. 172 col. + 1 b. & w. ills. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, in association with the Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas; Centro de Estudios Europa Hispanica/Center for Spain in America, Madrid and New York; and Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2019), \$55. ISBN 978-0-300-24831-9.

2 M. Arias Martínez: 'Un "Llanto sobre Cristo muerto" de Alonso Berruguete', *Ars Magazine* 27 (July–September 2015), pp.62–73.

3 D. Cordellier: 'Fragments de jeunesse: deux feuilles inédites de Michel-Ange au Louvre', *La Revue du Louvre* 41, no.2 (1991), pp.43–55.

4 R. Coppel: 'St Sebastian', in *idem* and N. Jennings: *Alonso Berruguete: Renaissance Sculptor*, London 2017, pp.77–82.

5 See P. Joannides: 'Bodies in the trees: a mass-martyrdom by Michelangelo', *Apollo* 140 (November 1994), pp.3–14; and *idem*: 'Unconsidered trifles: copies after lost drawings by Michelangelo', *Paragone* no.633, 3rd series, no.46 (November 2002), pp.3–17.

British Baroque: Power and Illusion

Tate Britain, London
4th February–19th April

by JEREMY WOOD

The period in British art from the Restoration in 1660 to the death of Queen Anne in 1714 has recently been described as 'competitive,

fragmented, and, on occasion, troubled',¹ a statement that opens fertile lines of investigation. The period had for long lacked an authoritative overview or meta-narrative (which are perhaps not quite the same thing) until David Solkin published his powerful account of it in 2015.² Nevertheless, Tabitha Barber and her team at Tate have been both brave and bold in tackling the complexities of the period in their

8. *Dummy board: man with a cane*. c.1690. Oil on panel lined with canvas, height 188 cm. (Victoria and Albert Museum, London; exh. Tate Britain, London).

