

14 Painting and sculpture

The real presence of greatness

The exquisite paintings and sculptures to be seen in Spain's cathedrals, and paraded in fiestas, portray a visceral realism that is as moving as it is beautiful. They are the beating heart of the country's religious culture



Holy Trinity (unknown author; from Medinaceli, a village in the province of Soria)



Top: Reclining Christ (by Gregorio Fernández; from Valladolid). Above left: Pentecost; above right: Prophet. Both are from the Altarpiece of the Virgin Mary (by Alonso de Sedano; from Montenegro de Cameros, in the province of Soria). All images are from Las Edades del Hombre exhibition in Soria

Above the altar in the dimly lit university chapel in Valladolid hangs a masterpiece of Spanish baroque sculpture: a bloody crucifix by Gregorio Fernández called Cristo de la Luz (Christ of the Light). The lifeless body of Christ exudes suffering in almost unbearable realism, the blood running down from cuts across his torso and staining his loincloth, his knees raw and wounded, his face contorted in death.

Such realism was typical of the painted wooden sculptures of the Spanish baroque, which were very different from the statues of bronze and marble being produced in Italy at the time. As part of the Catholic Counter-Reformation in the first half of the 17th century, baroque art wanted to reawaken the religious fervour of the faithful in the face of the nascent threat of Protestantism. In Spain, the realism of artworks such as the Cristo de la Luz was meant to transport the worshippers out of themselves and into a personal experience of Christ's death, to blur the divide between art and reality, to make them understand and meditate on the suffering of Christ.

For some, 400 years later, the power of these pieces remains. When Spain's National Museum of Sculpture, situated a few streets away from the chapel, asked to borrow the Cristo de la Luz for its grand reopening in September, the chapel's rector agreed. But the confraternity's attachment to the sculpture was so strong that on the day the movers came to take it away, they found their access to the chapel barred – the shutters had been pulled down and the doors locked. The crucifix stayed where it was.

All around Spain, in the back rooms and chapels of churches and cathedrals, there are stunning examples of baroque sculpture and painting just waiting to be stumbled upon. A few are appearing in the British National Gallery's exhibition *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600 to 1700*, running from 21 October 2009 to 24 January 2010 (p15). The difficulty the exhibition's curator, Xavier Bray, had in securing the loans of pieces for the exhibition illustrates the power they still hold over those who worship in their presence.

The Mater Dolorosa (Virgin of Sorrows) sculpture by Pedro de Mena, for example, housed in the museum of the Monasterio de San Joaquín y Santa Ana in Valladolid, is another masterpiece of baroque realism, with glass tears that catch the light, making them all the more naturalistic. When the National Gallery in London asked to borrow the piece, the convent's nuns initially voted unanimously not to allow it. It was only after promising to pay for a vitrine for the sculp-

ture, so it could be kept in a controlled environment, that the nuns agreed. Bray assured the convent's concerned abbess, Ana María Voces Sierra Ruda, that he would call her as soon as the sculpture arrived in London.

"Ask her [the sculpture] how she feels after her journey and let me know," the abbess replied.

To achieve their intense realism, these wooden sculptures were painstakingly carved, gessoed (primed) and then intricately polychromed (painted). Although the sculptor was the principal artist, the skill of the polychromer was also crucial in creating the desired effect. Many of the best sculptures were polychromed by Francisco Pacheco, who was teacher to a generation of painters, including Alonso Cano and the great Diego Velázquez. Polychromy would almost certainly have been an integral part of these artists' training, and this influence can be found in much of their later paintings.

While many of the great Spanish baroque sculptures are still in the hands of the church, and can only be seen perched high up on altarpieces or in hidden-away chapels, a good selection can also be found in the excellent National Museum of Sculpture in Valladolid.

One of the most powerful of all, Gregorio Fernández's Cristo Yacente (Reclining Christ), sits at the heart of the museum. Shockingly real, it was designed to sit under the altar so people could come right up to it to pray. Seeing up close its pale, bruised skin, its anguished face, its glass eyes that appear to look at you wherever you stand,

The sculptures of Fernández and his contemporaries were often paraded through the streets in Holy Week

is an unnerving experience even today. One can only imagine the effect it would have had on believers in Spain in the 17th century.

But these sculptures not only inspired devotion in the faithful, they also inspired painters, many of whom had painted them during their training.

The influence of sculpture is evident in many of the great Spanish paintings of the 17th century, widely regarded as Spain's golden age of painting. The work of Francisco de Zurbarán, for example, was dominated by sculpture. His figures appeared in isolation, like statues, while his celebrated Christ on the Cross, made for a small oratory attached to the sacristy of the Dominican friary of San Pablo in Sevilla, appeared to many at the time to actually be a sculpture, hung as it was from the wall of a dimly lit chapel.

Velázquez also illustrated the influence of sculpture in his painting *Christ Contemplated By the Christian Soul*. It depicts an angel teaching the Christian soul, repre-

sented by a child, about Christ's suffering after the flagellation. While Velázquez's Jesus appears modelled on a Fernández sculpture, the angel is notably pointing out the wounds on Jesus's back. The sculptures of Fernández and his contemporaries were often paraded through the streets during Holy Week for the faithful to fully appreciate Christ's suffering.

Art critic Waldemar Januszczak, in his recent BBC series *Baroque!*, said that while other movements sit there on their pedestals and arrogantly assume you'll be interested in them, the baroque knows you better: it gets down off the pedestal and hunts you down.

In the 21st century, much of these baroque works are still cherished and carefully guarded by the Church, aware of their power even today to stir the emotions. To see them you will need to do some hunting down of your own among Spain's multitude of churches and cathedrals.

Adharanand Finn

Las Edades del Hombre: the travelling exhibition

The region of Castilla y Leon is rich in religious art and artefacts, but scouting out these gems would take months, if not years of visiting the hundreds of small churches dotted around the cities and villages of the region.

Help is at hand in the form of the *Edades del Hombre* (Ages of Man) exhibition, which is housed in a different cathedral each year and displays some of the region's best religious artefacts.

The 2009 exhibition runs until 9 January, 2010, in the co-cathedral of Soria – the only administrative capital in the area that had yet to host it.

Since it began in 1988, the Ages of Man has had a different theme each year, with 2009's event subtitled *The Inner Landscape*. The intention is to focus on the roots and inner geography – the culture, faith, experiences, devotion and values – that for centuries have marked the life of the people of this region.

Many of the works are displayed in the aisles of the co-cathedral, while some are arranged around the cloister and in two Romanesque buildings in nearby villages in the chapels of San Baudelio, in Casillas de Berlanga, and San Miguel, in Gormaz.

Many of the exhibits pay homage to the Apostle St Peter (the patron saint of the co-cathedral), and to St Peter of Osma, who was the bishop who restored the diocese to its former status after the Christians regained control of the region from the Moors.

One sculpture, a piece by Alejo de Vahía, shows St Peter as a powerful figure, dressed as a pope and holding the symbols of his authority: the keys in his right hand indicate the authority he was granted by Christ, and the open book in his left hand stands for the authority of the word of God. Yet, while he was obviously powerful, he was also evidently a good man, the sculptor revealing a kindness and simplicity in his gentle, faraway expression.

Vahía worked for the diocese of Palencia at the end of the 15th and beginning of the 16th century. His work can be seen all over the Castilian district of Tierra de Campos, as well as in other regions. This sculpture was once the main figure of an altarpiece that no longer exists.

St Peter of Osma is also the subject of a sculpture by Juan de Juni. The piece is part of the high altarpiece of the cathedral of El Burgo de Osma. In this case, as in many of his talents for realism, such as the use of glass eyes and the magnificent anatomical study of the body that make the subject appear real and imposing.

The exhibition is not only about painting and sculpture. As well as a Bible, an organ,

and a room of relics, there is also a confessional converted from a sedan chair. Courtiers began using sedan chairs in 1601 as a luxury form of transport.

The chair on display is decorated with exquisite paintings, while the upholstery is woven in bright colours. However, the inner curtains have been replaced with grilles as it is still used today as a confessional in the church at Berzosa, in the province of Soria.

At the end of the exhibition is a retrospective from the 20 previous years' Ages of Man, which first took place in Valladolid in 1988. The cities of Valladolid, Burgos, León, Salamanca, Antwerp, Burgo de Osma, Palencia, Astorga, Zamora, New York, Segovia, Avila, Ciudad Rodrigo and Ponferrada have lent some of their most representative works for display. **AF** For next year's exhibition see *lasedades.es* (Spanish only)