

‘Savage Spain’? On the reception of Spanish art in Britain and Ireland

Review of:

Nigel Glendinning and Hilary Macartney, eds, *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1920: Studies in Reception in Memory of Enriqueta Harris Frankfort*, Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010, 307pp., 17 colour and 56 b. & w. illus., £50.00 hbk, ISBN: 9781855662230.



Fig. 1 Francisco de Zurbarán, *Saint Francis in Meditation*, c. 1635–9. Oil on canvas, 152 x 99 cm. London: National Gallery. © National Gallery Picture Library.

‘Neither size nor subject suit our creed, our climate, or our castles.’¹ So declared Richard Ford on the sale of Spanish paintings at Christie’s in 1853. Spanish art was indeed an acquired taste in early modern Britain, though British collectors, dealers and galleries continued to acquire works from Spain during the years 1750–1920, the period charted in this rich and illuminating volume. The reception history of Spanish art — here defined as spanning the Golden Age to Goya — is fundamental to our understanding and interpretation of the objects in question, and this new book

¹ Richard Ford, in Nigel Glendinning and Hilary Macartney, eds, *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland, 1750–1920: Studies in Reception in Memory of Enriqueta Harris Frankfort*, Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2010, 245.

marks an important contribution to the existing literature.² It is the first scholarly study entirely devoted to the reception of Spanish art in Britain and Ireland, and aptly dedicated to the memory of Enriqueta Harris Frankfort, who both formed its contributors and paved the way in this specialist area. The book essentially serves three functions: to commemorate its dedicatee; to provide an overview of the subject; and to showcase new research in the field.

Divided into two parts, the book also celebrates the fruitful collaboration between its editors, Nigel Glendinning and Hilary Macartney, and contributing authors, Jeremy Roe, Sarah Symmons and Marjorie Trusted. Part one comprises a series of fourteen essays, seven by Glendinning, four by Macartney and one by each contributor. Part two reproduces three essays by the late Enriqueta Harris on Sir William Stirling Maxwell, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (translated from the Spanish by Glendinning) and El Greco. The volume is conceived — practically and conceptually — for each chapter to function as a stand-alone essay and as a piece in a larger puzzle, with cross-references signposting connections across the text. This user-friendly, research-efficient design is most helpful for its target audience of students and specialists, allowing the reader to dip in easily to the individual chapters, in any order, without losing sight of the wider picture or main reference points.

Part one is divided into four sections: *The Growth of Interest in Spain and Spanish Art; Collecting and Access; Scholarship and Illustration of Spanish Art; Critical Fortunes of Spanish Art and Artists*. The structure creates a logical progression from broader discussions of taste and collecting, to historiographical concerns and specific case studies. The opening essay, 'British and Irish Interest in Hispanic Culture', co-authored by Harris and Glendinning, is reprinted from the first newsletter (2001) of ARTES Iberian and Latin American Visual Arts Group. It ends by suggesting that the 'immense power of Spain in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries may have left some residual antipathy or resentment in the British consciousness, but changes in public taste are notoriously difficult to trace and explain'.³

In the following chapter, Glendinning explores cross-cultural contacts with Spain, and in the next essay Symmons examines, for the first time, the role of women in conditioning the taste for Spanish art. Here we learn that before the influential publications of Ford's *Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home* (1845) and Stirling Maxwell's *Annals of the Artists of Spain* (1848), an obscure Irish woman, Mrs A. O'Neil, had published a *Dictionary of Spanish Painters* (1834), one of the first accounts in English on the subject.⁴ Symmons concludes that the responses of British women to Spanish art were varied and personal, but above all distinct from those of their male counterparts, notably in their appreciation for detail and curiosity, as well as in their preoccupation with the world of women as depicted by Spanish artists.⁵

² Previous studies range from Allan Braham, *El Greco to Goya: The Taste for Spanish Paintings in Britain and Ireland*, London: The National Gallery, 1981, to *The Discovery of Spain: British Artists and Collectors, Goya to Picasso*, Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2009.

³ Enriqueta Harris and Nigel Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 10.

⁴ Sarah Symmons, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 29.

⁵ Symmons, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 36.

The next section explores the reception of Spanish art through the analysis of customs books and sales catalogues; case studies of collectors, sellers and dealers; and access to public and private collections in Britain and Ireland. According to Glendinning, 'the importation of paintings direct from Spain began to grow in the eighteenth century, and then opportunities to purchase Spanish art increased vastly during the Peninsular War, largely through the activities of dealers'.⁶ Indeed, the Peninsular War (1808–14) marked a turning point for the reception of Spanish art in Britain: following the battle of Vittoria in 1813, the Duke of Wellington captured Joseph Bonaparte's baggage train, which contained an important group of Spanish paintings, notably Diego Velázquez's *Waterseller of Seville*. In 1816, the restored King Ferdinand VII officially gave this war booty to the Duke, who subsequently displayed it in Apsley House, which was accessible to a restricted audience from 1853 before opening its doors to the public in 1952.⁷

The nineteenth century saw the opening of important public collections in Britain, which housed and acquired Spanish art, namely Dulwich Picture Gallery (1817), the National Gallery (1824) and the Wallace Collection (1897). While the 1853 sale of King Louis-Philippe's Galerie Espagnole also raised the profile of Spanish art in Britain, enabling the National Gallery to obtain paintings such as Francisco de Zurbarán's *Saint Francis in Meditation* (Fig. 1), Trusted reminds us that non-Spanish works dominated British art collections in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that aside from artists, access was limited to gentlemen and gentlewomen.⁸ Nevertheless, Spanish art was increasingly admired and collected by prominent figures, among them John Charles Robinson who, in the mid-nineteenth century, broke the mould for collecting primarily Spanish paintings by acquiring Spanish sculptures for the current Victoria and Albert Museum, of which he was the first Curator.

The driving forces behind the fashioning of British taste for Spanish art were both aesthetic and scholarly. In the following two essays, Macartney examines the methods and techniques of writing, illustrating and reproducing Spanish art in the nineteenth century, with particular emphasis on Stirling Maxwell. A Scottish art historian, the latter's three-volume *Annals of the Artists of Spain* was the first scholarly history of Spanish art in English. Partly inspired by the Hispanophile Richard Ford, whose *Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain* was the first comprehensive guidebook to Spain in English, the *Annals* adopted a chronological framework and biographical format for the study of Spanish artists, while at the same time grounding them in their contemporary socio-historical context. Macartney explores in turn the role of prints, painted copies and photographs in disseminating knowledge and appreciation of Spanish art in Britain and Ireland. Stirling Maxwell began collecting prints after Spanish paintings in the 1840s in preparation for the *Annals*. Significantly, his was the first art history book to contain photographic illustrations

⁶ Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 63.

⁷ See Susan Jenkins, 'The "Spanish Gift" at Apsley House', *English Heritage Historical Review*, 2, 2007, 113–27.

⁸ Marjorie Trusted, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 82. For a recent study of the Galerie Espagnole, see Alisa Luxenberg, *The Galerie Espagnole and the Museo Nacional 1835–1853: Saving Spanish Art, or the Politics of Patrimony*, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

in the form of Talbotypes. The earliest forays into photographing fine art in Britain thus involved reproducing Spanish art, and these technological advances represented a milestone in the development of art history as a modern academic discipline.⁹

Part one concludes with a final section of six essays on the critical fortunes of Spanish art and artists in Britain and Ireland. The first two could well have formed a separate section devoted to shifting attitudes towards Spain, Glendinning's essay focusing on aesthetics and prejudice, Macartney's on Roman Catholicism. Alongside the increasing enthusiasm for Spanish art, Glendinning examines the aesthetic prejudices against the preference of Spanish artists for earthly 'realism' over ideal beauty. A case in point is Spanish polychrome sculpture, which both Ford and Stirling Maxwell consider inferior to uncoloured classical sculpture, though they simultaneously acknowledge its merits and wider appeal to both 'low' and 'high' audiences.¹⁰

Macartney then investigates the question of prejudice in a religious context. Just as the 'Black Legend' of Spain and the prevailing anti-Catholic sentiment in Britain inevitably influenced the reception of Spanish art, so did the contrast between the 'realism' of Spanish art versus the 'idealism' of Italian art suggest the negative impact of the Catholic Church in discouraging elevated ideas.¹¹ Despite the growing interest in Spanish art during the nineteenth century, the role of Spanish artists in the service of the Catholic Church continued to pose problems for British and Irish audiences. Moreover, Iberian art was not only acquired for public and private collections, but also for Roman Catholic churches in Britain, which were constructed following the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829, and Macartney ends this essay with two fascinating case studies of Saint Anthony's Church, Liverpool and Saint Margaret's Church, Huntly.

The following four chapters consider Spain's principal artistic protagonists: Murillo, Velázquez, Ribera, Zurbarán and Goya. The first concerns the so-called Murillo/Velázquez debate, investigating the painter Sir David Wilkie's response to these artists and the interpretation of his commentary by subsequent writers on Spanish art. Wilkie defined the terms of the debate, focusing on issues of gender, intellect and social status. Thus, the art of Murillo was characterized by more 'feminine' qualities, the art of Velázquez by its 'intellect'; the former appealed to a more universal audience, the latter to a more informed public.¹² Nineteenth-century writers oscillated between setting up terms of comparison, rivalry or complementarity when treating Murillo and Velázquez together. Taking his cue from Wilkie's comparison, Ford suggests a rivalry between the two, regarding Velázquez and Murillo as the respective Homer and Virgil of the Spanish School.¹³ Stirling Maxwell emphasizes complementarity and contrast between them in his discussion

⁹ Hilary Macartney, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 120–1.

¹⁰ For the fullest and most recent account of Spanish polychrome sculpture (and its relationship to painting), see Xavier Bray et al., *The Sacred Made Real: Spanish Painting and Sculpture 1600–1700*, London: The National Gallery, 2009.

¹¹ Macartney, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 148.

¹² Macartney, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 163–4.

¹³ Ford, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 170.

of Murillo's practical instruction versus Velázquez's theoretical training, and in his consideration of the former as an exception, and the latter as a representative Spanish artist.

Arguably even more of an exception and representative of the Spanish School was Jusepe de Ribera. Born in Spain, Ribera lived and worked for most of his life in Naples, then a Spanish possession governed by viceroys, where he was nicknamed 'Lo Spagnoletto' (the little Spaniard). According to the eighteenth-century sale catalogues, paintings by Ribera attracted considerable interest from British and Irish collectors between 1715 and 1840.¹⁴ The dark tonalities of Ribera's works, which immediately recall the chiaroscuro and tenebrism of Caravaggio, appealed to eighteenth-century tastes for darkness and pain in art and literature. Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757) explores the contemporary preoccupations with Terror, Darkness and Blackness; Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764) introduces the notion of The Terrible Sublime, which he distinguishes from the 'Noble' or 'Splendid' Sublime, connecting it specifically to the national character of Spaniards.¹⁵ Within this literary and aesthetic context, Ribera's tenebrist pictures of extreme subjects enjoyed a favourable reception in eighteenth-century Britain and Ireland.

In the nineteenth century, however, Ribera's art received mixed reviews, which took the form of poetry, travel writing and art criticism. When describing a picture gallery in his epic poem *Don Juan* (1823), Lord Byron writes 'Of martyrs awed, as Spagnoletto tainted / his brush with all the blood of all the sainted'.¹⁶ The French echo of these verses clearly resonates in the collection of poems entitled *España* (1845) by Théophile Gautier, two of which are explicitly dedicated to Ribera. In his sonnet on the *Prometheus* (now *Tityus*) in the Prado, Gautier directly accuses Ribera of cruelty — 'Toi, cruel Ribeira [*sic*], plus dur que Jupiter' ('You, cruel Ribera, harsher than Jupiter') — thereby striking a similar chord with Byron.¹⁷

Moreover, in his *Hand-Book for Travellers in Spain*, Ford considers Ribera 'unpopular in England', declaring him a 'cruel forcible imitator of ordinary ill-

¹⁴ Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 191–2.

¹⁵ Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 192–3.

¹⁶ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, xiii, 71.

¹⁷ Théophile Gautier, *Voyage en Espagne suivi de España*, Paris: Gallimard, 1981, 471. For the English translation, see Harald Hendrix, 'The Repulsive Body: Images of Torture in Seventeenth-Century Naples', in Florike Egmond and Robert Zwijnenberg, eds, *Bodily Extremities: Preoccupations with the Human Body in Early Modern European Culture*, Aldershot, Hants: Ashgate, 2003, 71. For a wide-ranging study of Ribera's reception, see Pierre Rosenberg, 'De Ribera a Ribot. Del naturalismo al academicismo: el destino de un pintor en pos de su nacionalidad y de su definición estilística', in *Jusepe de Ribera 1591–1652*, Madrid: Museo Nacional del Prado, 1992, 147–63. For an extended study of Ribera's reception in nineteenth-century Britain and France, see Edward Payne, 'The Tainted Brush? Reconsidering the Nineteenth-Century Reception of Ribera', in *Violence and Corporeality in the Art of Jusepe de Ribera*, PhD thesis, London: The Courtauld Institute of Art, University of London, forthcoming, 2012. This chapter developed from two unpublished papers, "'Plus dur que Jupiter": Reconsidering Gautier's Reception of Ribera', delivered at The University of London Institute in Paris, 2007, and 'Britain's *Bête Noire*? The Reception of Ribera in the Nineteenth Century', delivered at the Association of Art Historians Annual Conference in Glasgow, 2010.

selected nature [who] riots in hard ascetic monks and blood-boltered subjects'.¹⁸ Stirling Maxwell balances his comments on Ribera's 'masterpieces of horror, too frightful to be remembered without a shudder' by admitting that the artist 'did not, however, always paint in this savage and revolting style'.¹⁹ Nevertheless, Stirling Maxwell agrees with Ford in stating that Ribera's 'passion for the horrible was little likely to produce a favourable impression of Spanish taste'.²⁰

The negative reception of Ribera reached its heights with John Ruskin, who wrote of 'rascally black Spanish things, Riberas and Zubbarans', no doubt referring to the paintings he had seen at Louis-Philippe's Galerie Espagnole in the Louvre (1838–48).²¹ Of some 400 paintings in the Spanish Gallery, eighty were attributed to Zurbarán. These works were all sold at Christie's in 1853, and undeniably the most controversial acquisition was his *Saint Francis in Meditation*, bought for the National Gallery, London. Although this was the highlight picture of the Galerie Espagnole, a series of letters to *The Times* reveals that its reception in London was mixed. William Coningham, MP, attacked the work as 'a small, black, repulsive picture'. Ford and Stirling Maxwell wrote a joint reply defending the purchase, its dark tonality and subject matter. This correspondence suggests that British taste was now gravitating away from The Terrible Sublime.²²

Nevertheless, the dark and grotesque aspects of Francisco de Goya's art, in particular his series of etchings entitled *Caprichos*, did appeal to a wide international audience. Although Ruskin notoriously burnt a copy of the series, Goya's prints were prized and collected by eminent figures such as Stirling Maxwell, whose *Annals* contextualizes Goya and examines his role as both painter and printmaker. The Duke of Wellington was most likely given a copy of the *Caprichos*, and he also brought back from Spain two portraits of himself by Goya, the equestrian version in Apsley House, and the half-length version in the National Gallery.²³

Part two of this book, which functions like an appendix but could equally have served as the opening section, reproduces three essays of 1964, 1982 and 1995 by Enriqueta Harris on Stirling Maxwell, Murillo and El Greco, respectively. These three monographic chapters, coupled with the preceding four, recall the monographic approach to Spanish art history, which is habitually bracketed 'from El Greco to Goya' in modern scholarship. Stirling Maxwell established this trend in the mid-nineteenth century with the publication of *Velazquez and his Works* (1855), the first monograph on the artist. The German historian Carl Justi followed suit, publishing his scholarly monograph on Velázquez first in German (1888), then in an English translation, *Velazquez and his Times* (1889).²⁴ That the monographic approach still prevails in the current literature, and even takes the form of individual chapters

¹⁸ Richard Ford, *A Handbook for Travellers in Spain and Readers at Home*, vol. 3, London: Centaur Press Ltd., 1966, 1123.

¹⁹ William Stirling Maxwell, *Annals of the Artists of Spain*, vol. 3, London: John C. Nimmo, 1891, 901–3.

²⁰ Stirling Maxwell, *Annals*, vol. 1, 55.

²¹ John Ruskin, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 204.

²² Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 203–4.

²³ Glendinning, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 209–12.

²⁴ Macartney, in *Spanish Art in Britain and Ireland*, 94.

in this book, demonstrates the extent to which modern scholarship is inevitably shaped by nineteenth-century conceptions of Spanish art.

While this collection of essays is ambitious both in chronological breadth and material scope, one way in which it could be expanded, methodologically, is by combining reception history and reception theory, drawing on the literature of reception aesthetics.²⁵ This would add another dimension to the book, and it would give the study a broader theoretical edge. Overall, the book does more than pay tribute to its dedicatee. Its greatest strength lies in overturning and complicating the stereotype of a 'savage Spain', and it provides a model of rigorous scholarship and fruitful collaboration. The end result is a handsomely designed volume which Enriqueta Harris would certainly have been proud to see.

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²⁵ See for example Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans, Richard Howard, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Eng trans, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978; Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception*, trans, Timothy Bahti, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982.