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Griffin Oleynick

Sacred Heart University, Oleynickg@sacredheart.edu

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Griffin Oleynick

None of Us Faces Judgment Alone

'ZURBARÁN'S JACOB AND HIS TWELVE SONS' AT THE FRICK

With the arrival of the Easter season, we might be tempted to cast a backward glance at our ascetic efforts during Lent. What Lenten discipline did we practice? How did it go for us? Did it help us realize the new life we'd hoped for? Because they put the emphasis on ourselves and our actions, rather than on God and God's activity in our lives, these kinds of questions miss the point. Salvation leaves no room for solipsism: conversion is always a communal, collective process. Our turning to God during Lent, and our experience of new life at Easter, either happens together, as part of a family of faith, or not at all.

A new exhibition of Spanish paintings by the Golden Age master Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), "Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle," on view through April 22 at the Frick Collection in New York City, provides a refreshing reminder of this dynamic by bringing us into conversation with our religious ancestors, the Old Testament Patriarchs. This series of thirteen life-sized portraits, displayed as a kind of choreographed procession that wraps around the four walls of a single room at the Frick, depicts a subject rarely found in European religious painting: Jacob's Blessing, which appears at the end of the Book of Genesis. In the Biblical text, Jacob's prophetic verses, dramatically uttered on his deathbed, reveal the divergent destinies of each of his twelve sons, the legendary founders of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. Taken together, they convey a firm sense of hope, recalling God's promise of fecundity made to Abraham earlier in Genesis, but also an anxious sentiment of foreboding, as they point to future suffering in Exodus.

Zurbarán's artistic virtuosity is on full display as he transforms Jacob's

poetry into a compelling visual sequence of striking costumes, delicate gestures, and complex facial expressions. Equally striking is the fact that these paintings have arrived on our shores. Likely commissioned to adorn a monastery in the New World but never exhibited in the United States until now, the portraits were produced in Seville in the early 1640s, when Zurbarán was at the height of his creative powers. Mysteriously, the completed paintings never reached their final destination, somehow vanishing from the historical record for almost a century. They only surfaced again in an English merchant's log in 1722, before they were purchased at auction in 1756 by the Anglican Bishop Richard Trevor,

a staunch proponent of legal equality for Jews. Wishing to make a powerful statement in support of Jewish rights, Trevor installed the series in the dining room of the Bishop's Residence at Auckland Castle in County Durham, where the paintings have remained for 250 years. Freed for travel by a two-year renovation at Auckland Castle, *Jacob and His Twelve Sons* constitutes the first major exhibition of Zurbarán's works to be held here in the United States in more than three decades.

Though his reputation is often obscured by the fame of his better-known contemporary Diego Velázquez, Zurbarán is hardly a stranger to American art galleries, collectively the largest repository for his works outside of Spain. Masterpieces like the hyper-realistic *Still Life with Lemons, Oranges, and a Rose* and the haunting *Martyrdom of Saint Serapion* have contributed to the popular idea of Zurbarán as the "Spanish Caravaggio," an unabashed master of naturalistic detail and dramatic chiaroscuro technique—albeit one with a decidedly ascetic, even monastic temperament.

Almost all of Zurbarán's works were originally commissioned by churches and religious orders, which sought grand iconographic representations of their Catholic faith during the height of the Counter-Reformation in Spain. Perhaps not surprisingly, much recent criticism has tried to distance the artist from overly spiritualizing interpretations of his paintings. Instead of sincerely depicting his own inner spiritual vision, the argument goes, Zurbarán acted instead as a canny businessman with a knack for winning commissions in the highly competitive art market of Inquisition-era Seville. The stirring, humane quality of his works thus emerges not because of, but rather in spite of, their overtly religious subjects.



Francisco de Zurbarán, Naphtali, ca. 1640–45