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None of Us Faces Judgment Alone: ‘Zurbarán’s Jacob and His Twelve Sons’ at the Frick

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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.