

"SAINT JAMES THE GREATER"

JOSÉ DE RIBERA

16 SEPTEMBER 2014 – 11 JANUARY 2015

THERE ARE FIVE KNOWN VERSIONS of this Saint James the Greater by José de Ribera. Two are to be found in private collections; one is in the Palazzo Corsini in Rome; another in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich; and this version, which belongs to the Museo de Bellas Artes in Seville. Only the painting from the German museum is signed, and dated 1634. Following the discovery of this signature, the versions in Rome and Seville – previously regarded as works of the Sicilian Pietro Novelli (1603-1647) – were attributed to Ribera, helping the study of development of his work.

Figures are presented in two-thirds, on dark and neutral backgrounds, as complete characters that challenge the viewer with fixed and challenging looks while props and attributes are kept to a minimum. Such paintings quickly made Ribera famous. His characters are placed in the foreground of the frames and loaded with expression (the models were popular figures, painted *dal vero*, their faces and hands marked by the passage of time and difficulties yet showing great vitality) from which a dry heroism emerges, without sentimentality or picturesque intent.

During the first decades of activity in Rome and Naples, Ribera produced series of apostles, ancient philosophers and representations of the five senses in which characters of rough and expressive appearance paraded, embodying the moral and psychological characteristics of the painted historical or allegorical figures. It is likely that this piece belonged to one of these series of apostles. Its size suggests this as it corresponds to a standardised measure widely used by Ribera – a rod and a half by a rod and a third (a Burgos rod = 83.6 cm) – of which there are both plenty of paintings and abundant documentary references in old inventories. Nevertheless, given the profusion of paintings of Saint James attributed to him, the subject of the Apostle of Spain must also have occupied isolated panels ordered by his Iberian clientele.

The date of 1634 which appears in the Saint James in the Alte Pinakothek in Munich must be, give or take a year, indicative of the entire set

***Saint James the Greater***José (Jusepe) de Ribera
(Xàtiva, 1591–Naples, 1652)

c. 1634

Oil on canvas, 120 × 97 cm

Donation González Abreu

Museo de Bellas Artes de Sevilla, inv. ce0098p

of these paintings, including this version from Seville. Incidentally, around this time Ribera used the same male model in paintings of other subjects, such as *St. Joseph and the Child* from the Prado Museum (inv^o 1002) or *Jacob with the Flock of Laban* from the Monastery of San Lorenzo de El Escorial, signed and dated 1632. This period marks the great maturity of the painter when early Caravaggesque influences began to fade as an increased interest in masters like Titian or contemporaries such as Rubens and Van Dyck emerged. In particular, his highly personalised application of impasto, with deep blacks, luminous whites and matt earths, underlined his own style which gave him a distinct place in the history of European painting and made Ribera one of the most unique Baroque painters.

His concern with the expressiveness of emotions was revealed in his painted work and also in a series of drawings of almost caricatured faces, and engravings, where he catalogued the expression of emotions through eyes and mouths. This study of human passions and their artistic expression enabled him to achieve an enormous psychological density in paintings of isolated figures, of which this Saint James is an excellent example, and to take the representation of suffering and pain to the limit in series such as the Furies, Martyrs of St. Bartholomew and St. Philip, and of course, in the paintings of the Passion, especially in the Lamentations of Christ Deposed from the Cross, making some of these the most accomplished compositions of all 17th century painting.

Despite his fame, the painter's biography contained many gaps until half a dozen years ago, in part due to the confusion created by his first biographers in an effort to glorify him, like Bernardo de Dominici or Antonio Palomino de Castro, by attributing him with a noble descent, for example. In fact, José de Ribera was born in Xàtiva, near Valencia, and was baptised on 17 February, 1591, the second child of the marriage of Simon Ribera, shoemaker, to Margaret Cuco in 1588. Until 1611, nothing certain is known about his life. Would he have had an apprenticeship in Valencia, where the painter Francisco Ribalta was becoming sensitive to Caravaggio's dramatic chiaroscuro, or did he begin his artistic career in Italy? How and when did he settle there? It is known, however, that both Jerome, his eldest brother, and Juan, another brother born in 1593, made documented appearances in Rome and Naples together with José. It is probable that Juan, also a painter, formed part of his workshop. It is certain only that in 1611 Ribera was in Parma and was already a painter of some standing. Ludovico Carracci (1555-1619) praised him then as a painter of the Caravaggesque school. It is most likely that his stay in Parma was already a consequence of the learning and reputation he

obtained in Rome where he lived with the group of Nordic Caravaggesque painters and received his first known commissions, as well as gaining a reputation for having an irascible bohemian temperament, to which Carracci also refers, and the nickname of "lo Spagnoletto" (the Little Spaniard).

In 1616, he was already definitively in Naples, starting a brilliant career. According to De Dominici, he was soon named "painter for the town council" by the viceroy, an unproven claim, despite the certainty of his protection by the Duke of Osuna (viceroy between 1616 and 1620). In 1618 he in fact lived in the Duke's palace and there are several reports of his continued presence there. Also in 1616, he married the daughter of the Sicilian painter Giovanni Bernardino Az-zolino (1572-1645) who was established in Naples and one of the principal masters in the city.

In 1631, he painted the family of the famous Magdalena Ventura, a wondrous woman with a long beard and manly face, who was at that time a guest of the viceroy, the Duke of Alcalá. In the long inscription with which he signed this painting, Ribera made the only reference to his status as Knight of the Order of Christ, a distinction that he had requested and obtained five years earlier.

With the support of the Spanish nobility — whose compatriotism Ribera did not forget to evoke, making express reference to their Hispanic status in most of the works that he signed —, the integration with his peers afforded by his father-in-law's relationships and the promotion by influential traders of local artwork, such as Gaspar Rommer (c. 1596-1674) who exported paintings for major European collectors, José de Ribera quickly became the most sought after artist of Naples, sustaining his enormous workshop (and a great legion of followers and imitators). Long after his death, paintings "in the style of Ribera" continued to be ordered and copies of his works proliferated in European collections.

SPONSORS:

