

THE SACRED MADE REAL

SPANISH PAINTING & SCULPTURE 1600-1700



In a darkened room, the body of the dead Christ lies on a crumpled white cloth. His skin and lips have a deathly blue tone while the rivulets of blood running down his body and the congealed blood around his wounds has not yet been washed away. Across the room his mother, Mary, is weeping, her skin reddened through crying with the tracks of tears noticeable where they have run down her face. Then the body of Jesus is seen again, this time clean and cradled in the arms of Saint John the Evangelist and the Virgin Mary, whilst Mary Magdalene bends to kiss his feet.



1 Dead Christ, Fernandez

exquisite craftsmanship and high level of realism achieved by the Spanish painters and sculptors of the 17th Century and the clear links between their work demonstrated by the exhibition. During the Counter Reformation of the 17th Century the Catholic Church used art to inspire religious faith and fervour amongst its followers, and in Spain this gave rise to a demand that all religious art should be so life like as to make the sacred real. Due to the intense skill of Spanish artists, this emotional impact is still discernable today.

The intense realism of the sculpture displayed at The National Gallery was achieved through the technique of polychromism: after carving, the sculptor sent the wooden sculpture to a painter who brought it to life through the application of paint and other materials to the model. In the *Dead Christ* glass eyes, bullhorn fingernails and ivory teeth are used whilst the application of cork bark around Christ's wounds makes the congealed blood look

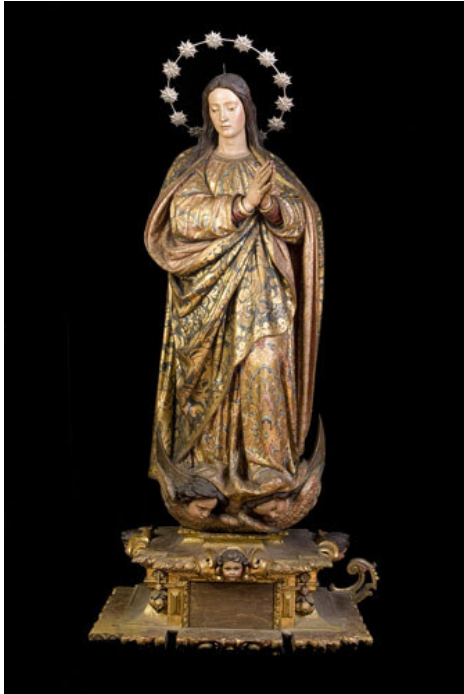
Despite the realism, this is not a series of live tableaux but a room within the *The Sacred Made Real* exhibition at The National Gallery, visited by a group from the Parish on Monday 23rd November. The extreme realism of both the polychrome sculptures of the *Dead Christ* by Fernández and *The Virgin of Sorrows* by de Mena, juxtaposed by the greater serenity of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ* by de Ribera, are exemplary of the



2 The Virgin of Sorrows, de Mena (detail)

shockingly realistic. In *The Virgin of Sorrows* animal-glue tear stains and glass tears makes Mary's grief all the more tangible. The comparative serenity of *The Lamentation over the Dead Christ*

emphasises the human grief and bloody realism. However, polychrome sculpture was not used exclusively to demonstrate suffering. *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*, attributed to Montañes, creates a sense of ornate splendour through the delicate carving and gilding of her robes.



3 The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, Montanes

The impact of sculpture on painting highlighted by the exhibition provided an extra dimension for the Spanish spectator. Many artists used religious sculpture of their chosen subject as a direct source of inspiration; in order to create the figure of Christ in his *Christ after the Flagellation contemplated by the Christian Soul*, it is highly likely that Velázquez studied sculptures of the same subject, such as *Ecce Homo* by Fernández. The contemporary spectator, with a similar awareness to Velázquez of such sculptures, would be able to look at the work and contemplate the physical wounds on Christ's back which Velázquez does not reveal; the close proximity of the work of Fernández within the exhibition space enables the modern spectator to do the same. Equally, many of the paintings exhibited have a highly sculptural quality, accentuated by the directional light. *Christ on the Cross* by de Zurbarán gives a prime example of this at the exhibition.

In its original location in an arched alcove with the illumination within the painting reflecting the natural light in the room the painting appeared so realistic that, according to the 18th Century Spanish art historian Palomino, "everyone who sees it and does not know believes it to be a sculpture." Although the impact of each artwork's original situation cannot be recreated exactly within The National Gallery, the use of low general lighting and brighter directional light to illuminate the artworks within brings out the dramatic shadows.

The careful construction of the exhibition also underlines the enduring the works' enduring impact, both in Spain and more generally. Polychrome sculpture still plays a major role in Spanish religious festivals, particularly during Holy Week when floats, or *pasos*, bearing life-size sculptures are carried in candlelit processions. This 'powerful' and 'moving' exhibition perhaps challenges us to think how we 'make the sacred real' in our time.

For further information on the exhibition, visit

<http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/whats-on/exhibitions/the-sacred-made-real>



4 Christ on the Cross, de Zurbarán