

True Painting and the Challenge of Hypocrisy¹

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‘Non est animus ἰσπανιζεῖν’.

ERASMUS of Rotterdam (23 August 1517)

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‘Le vrai, toujours le vrai, c’est ta seule devise.’

THÉOPHILE GAUTIER

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Arguably the most influential date for the reception of Spanish painting is 1838, the year the famous *Galerie Espagnole* or Spanish Gallery opened at the Louvre. There, more than 400 paintings of the Spanish Baroque were displayed, the result of careful collecting in the previous years by Louis-Philippe as part of an institutional campaign that cost the French government 1.3 million francs.² The exhibition would last only ten years, but the impact it had in the European art world for both painters and critics alike can still be felt today.

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- 2 Francisco Almela y Vives, ‘El poeta Théophile Gautier ante el pintor José Ribera’, *Archivo de Arte Valenciano*, 32 (1961): pp. 24–38. On the reception of Spanish painting in nineteenth-century France, see Ilse Hempel Lipschutz, *Spanish Painting and the French Romantics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); Alisa Luxenberg, *The Galerie Espagnole and the*

It was not only the moment in which painters of the generation of Édouard Manet were confronted for the first time with the works of Velázquez, Murillo or Zurbarán, with very well known artistic consequences, but was also the time when the existence of an *École Espagnole* was first seriously considered, lying somewhere on the margins of the best-known established artistic traditions, mostly those of Italy and Flanders.

'One leaves the Spanish gallery' – wrote one critic – 'dazzled by the brilliance of the colours, gripped by the energy of execution and the power of the *truth* of this original painting'. 'Truthfulness' was to become one of the keywords that critics would begin insistently using from the 1830s, the other one, 'devotion'. Most of the paintings painstakingly collected by Louis-Philippe's agent in Spain, Baron Taylor, were religious paintings, unambiguous in their intensity, and crude in their style. Art critics labeled Murillo as the artist of 'tender and amorous devotion', Zurbarán 'cadaverous and monastic', Ribera's martyrdoms, 'bloody and savage'. All painters, however, coincided in bringing to the heart of Paris the extreme piety and crude superstition that three centuries of the Black Legend had prepared people to expect coming from South of the Pyrenees. The romantic fascination with Spanish paintings and its pervasive rhetoric continues to poison the art historical well. While recent literature and a few important exhibitions have revisited Spanish baroque painting not in isolation from but in creative dialogue with the artistic currents of its time, they have done nothing but reinforce the idea that Spanish art was the truthful expression of Spaniards' deep, almost primitive religiosity. Sincere belief became a condition of Spanish painting, one that at the same time distinguished this tradition and rendered it exotic.

Interestingly, a more complex understanding can be read in between the lines of the most perceptive comments of the French critics of the French *Galerie Espagnole*. In one of the earliest reactions recorded, Théophile Gautier praised Ribera's commitment to pictorial truth (*le vrai, toujours le vrai*) with verses that paradoxically coupled his obsessive representation of martyrdoms with the suggestion that, far from being the expression of orthodox faith, Ribera's work was in fact the traumatic result of the artist's birth in a land infected with converted Jews and Muslims:

Reckless peasant, sketchy beggar
 Moor that baptism could hardly make a Christian [emphasis mine]
 While another might seek the beautiful, you seek out the shocking
 ... the truth, always the truth, it's your only currency.

Museo Nacional 1835–1853: Saving Spanish Art, or the Politics of Patrimony (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008).