

The arduous search for the beginnings of Ribera: Exhibitions in Madrid and Naples

José Milicua and Javier Portús (ed.)
El joven Ribera. Madrid, Museo del Prado 2011. 205 p., var. ill.
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Nicola Spinosa (ed.)
Il giovane Ribera tra Roma, Parma e Napoli 1608-1624. Naples, Arte'm 2011. 247 p., var. ill.
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Jusepe de Ribera, born in Xátiva in the kingdom of València, but active mainly in Naples, has been appreciated since his lifetime for his outstanding technical mastery. It is a well-known fact that, as early as ca. 1620 Giulio Mancini described Ribera as a follower of Caravaggio who surpassed his model in certain aspects (“più tento e più fiero”). Accordingly, his works never fell out of favour with collectors. The demand has always been greater than the supply, encouraging the spread of copies and imitations. As a consequence, commercial interests are involved in many discussions of his work.

The Ribera catalogue of 2003 by Nicola Spinosa, the long-time *soprintendente* of Naples, accepted more than 300 paintings as autographs: quite an output even for an efficient craftsman – Mancini praised Ribera’s “prestezza del lavorar” – and all the more so if one takes into account that many of these works are of remarkable size. Only five years later, the Spanish edition of the same monograph

already offered a considerable number of additional attributions (Spinosa, *Ribera*, Naples 2003; *Ribera. La obra completa*, Madrid 2008).

NEW ATTRIBUTIONS

The period most affected by additions to Ribera’s catalogue has been the artist’s early career, before he firmly established himself in Naples in 1616. Before this, there are only a few secure dates: Ribera was baptised in 1591; in 1611, he painted a *Saint Martin* for Parma that is today only known through copies; finally, in 1613, he became a member of the Academy of Saint Luke in Rome, where he is documented until May 1616. Ribera’s first authenticated commission that can be securely identified was realised only two years later, in 1618: the large *Crucifixion* today in the church of Osuna. As a result of this scarce documentation, several questions have come into the focus of discussion: not only which works he might have painted before 1618, but also whether these works originated in Rome or Naples. It is also up for debate when and on which road he travelled from València to Rome, and which role his early stay in Northern Italy might have played in his artistic evolution. An excellent resume of what is known of Ribera’s biography has just been offered by Craig Felton (Jusepe de Ribera, Called “lo Spagnoletto” [1591-1652]: A Spanish Painter in Baroque Italy, in: Gabriele Finaldi [ed.], *Jusepe de Ribera’s Mary Magdalene in a new context*, Dallas 2011, 34-77; Exhibition: The Prado at the Meadows, Dallas, 18 September 2011–15 January 2012).

In the 1960s, there was a first boom of attributions that assembled a group of not much more than a dozen pre-Osuna paintings. The most important step was the identification of a series of the *Five Senses*, initiated by Roberto Longhi and Erich Schleier. This series is usually identified with one mentioned by Mancini as having been painted



Fig. 1 View of the Madrid exhibition with the Toronto *Saint Jerome* displayed between the Longhi *Apostolate* and the *Five Senses*; in the background, the *Resurrection of Lazarus* and *Jesus among the Doctors* (photo: Matthias Weniger)

when Ribera was still in Rome. The handling of brushwork of these paintings resembles the documented later work of Ribera, as does that of the *Saints Peter and Paul* in Strasbourg. The latter painting bears a signature whose characters and wording place it at an early stage of Ribera's career. A distinctively new light was shed on Ribera's early years when Craig Felton published in 1991 the Toronto *Saint Jerome* that again displays a signature of the artist but differs even more heavily from his later manner (Marcantonio Doria and Jusepe de Ribera's early commissions in Naples, in: *Ricerche sul '600 napoletano* 10, 1991, 123-128). Other works like the design of a large *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, known through different versions (Melbourne, Dresden, Rome, etc.), were, as I believe, situated wrongly at such an early stage of Ribera's career.

This reconstruction of Ribera's early years, though, was codified by the large monographic exhibitions on the artist held at Naples, Madrid and New York in 1992. Exactly ten years later, Gianni Papi started a series of almost annual publications (Jusepe de Ribera a Roma e il Maestro del Giudizio di Solomone, in: *Paragone* 44, 2002, 21-43; Ancora su Ribera a Roma, in: *Les cahiers d'histoire de l'art* 1,

2003, 63-74; Ribera 3, in: *Paragone* 55, 2004, 16-21, etc.). They are continued by his essay (Ribera en Roma. La relevación del genio, 31-59) and by his catalogue entries to the Madrid catalogue. In those publications, Papi multiplied the number of paintings given to the young Ribera. Apart from crediting him with individual works, Papi proposed to merge the paintings hitherto attributed to an anonymous Master of the Judgment of Solomon – named after a picture in the Galleria Borghese – with the works attributed to the young Ribera himself. Another important aspect of Papi's research is his attempt to identify the extant works with paintings mentioned in contemporary inventories. In most cases, however, we cannot be sure that the preserved works are really the ones mentioned in the sources, and even if we can, as in the case of the *Apostles* from the Fondazioni Longhi, this does not automatically secure an attribution; several cases prove that even judgments on authorship made in Ribera's lifetime may not always be trusted.

THE YOUNG RIBERA

In 2001, the Prado bought a *Resurrection of Lazarus*, an acquisition driven forward mainly by one of the great old men of Ribera research, José Milicua, while other scholars have remained sceptical about



Fig. 2 View of the Naples exhibition with the Denial of Saint Peter, the Crucifixion from Osuna and the Resurrection of Lazarus (photo: M. Weniger)

its attribution. These discussions were at the base of the important exhibitions on the young Ribera presented in the Museo del Prado in Madrid in 2011, and at the Museo Capodimonte in Naples in 2011/12, on the initiative of José Milicua and Javier Portús, and of Nicola Spinosa, respectively. The pace of progress in Ribera research permitted the inclusion into the Naples show of a few additional paintings still unknown only half a year earlier, and Papi again modified his chronology for the later catalogue.

Both exhibitions offered a unique chance to see the new proposals next to the series of the *Five Senses* and to documented or signed works like the paintings from Osuna, Strasbourg and Toronto (the two latter ones in Madrid only). In the Prado, the *Five Senses* were placed face to face with the Longhi *Apostolate*, that in the pre-Papi era had been considered to be a central work of the Master of the Judgment of Solomon. In the centre of these cycles stood, quite appropriately, the signed *Saint Jerome* from Toronto (fig. 1). The exhibition in Naples confronted the new proposals and the long-

established attributions in a sometimes even more dramatic way, and furthermore displayed a few more problematic pictures (fig. 2). Among the 32 paintings shown in Madrid, 13 had not been listed as autograph in Spinosa's 2003 catalogue that had, though, already incorporated some of Papi's proposals. For Naples, this was even true for 20 out of 43. It goes without saying that while the exhibitions were being mounted, yet more paintings attributed to Ribera's early years were published (cf. Massimo Pulini, *Cristologia di Nicolò Musso e due aggiunte al giovane Ribera*, in: *Storia dell'arte* 128, 2011, 62-68, here: 66-68).

Both exhibitions made it clear that, while a few of the new propositions can be quickly discarded, most need serious consideration. And both showed that the works now attributed to the young Ribera do not form a coherent group. In fact, it is difficult to find even two that are truly painted in the same manner. How far one is disposed to go in the acceptance of the new works depends thus on

the degree of variety and change one is ready to concede to the artist. The *Judgment of Solomon*, the Prado *Resurrection of Lazarus*, the Palazzo Corsini *Denial of Saint Peter*, the *Jesus among the Doctors* in Langres, and a *Susanna with the Elders* in private hands would all have the credentials to be considered potential early works, but it is extremely hard to reconcile their patent differences of execution under one single authorship.

MARKED ARTISTIC EVOLUTION

That there has been a marked evolution in Ribera's work is proven by the contrast between the signed *Saint Jerome* in Toronto and the *Crucifixion* in Osuna. And that the artist played with different *modi* can already be seen in the five paintings in Osuna, from which the four representations of saints are in some respect closer to works from the 1620s than the *Crucifixion* that documentary evidence suggests was painted as the last of this series. Equally instructive would be a comparison between Ribera's famous 1626 *Saint Jerome* from the Trinità delle Monache in Naples and a *Virgin with Saint Bruno* that is now in Berlin, but had been displayed before for almost 130 years in Weimar. This painting, present in Naples, is signed and dated 1624, two years earlier than the *Saint Jerome*, but treated in an amazingly different manner. This becomes particularly clear if one looks on an X-ray of the head of *Saint Bruno* (fig. 3), comparing it with the treatment made visible by radiographies of other works by Ribera. As for the presumed early paintings, the modelling revealed by the X-ray of the *Bust Portrait of a Man* in Berlin, the cover picture of the Naples exhibition, looks more uniform and much less spontaneous than that of the mature works of the artist (fig. 4). However, it seems slightly more in tune with the modelling of the *Resurrection of Lazarus*.

Unfortunately, only very little comparative material has been published (for some notable exceptions, see: Ljudmila Kagané, *Los cuadros de Ribera y de su círculo en el Ermitage*, in: *Archivo español de arte* 64, 1991, 423–438; *Ribera: La Piedad*, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid 2003, 60–68; Javier Portús, in: *El joven Ribera* (catalogue Madrid),

63–66; cf. also Matthias Weniger, *Bestandskatalog Spanische Malerei. Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden, Munich* [etc.] 2012, 92–128). In general, technical research on the paintings attributed to Ribera is trailing far behind the standards set for other artists of his rank. Before more analysis will be available, debates on some of the attributions involved in the Madrid and Naples exhibitions will thus remain rather academic.

Such research is also necessary in order to define more clearly the role Ribera played within the highly complex network of artists working in Rome in the years around 1610. Being of different nationalities, they were united by the deep impact the new manner of Caravaggio had left on them, but they also influenced each other. Quotations of style as well as of motives between these paintings make judgments on individual attributions even more hazardous. The *Denial of Saint Peter*, dated by Papi

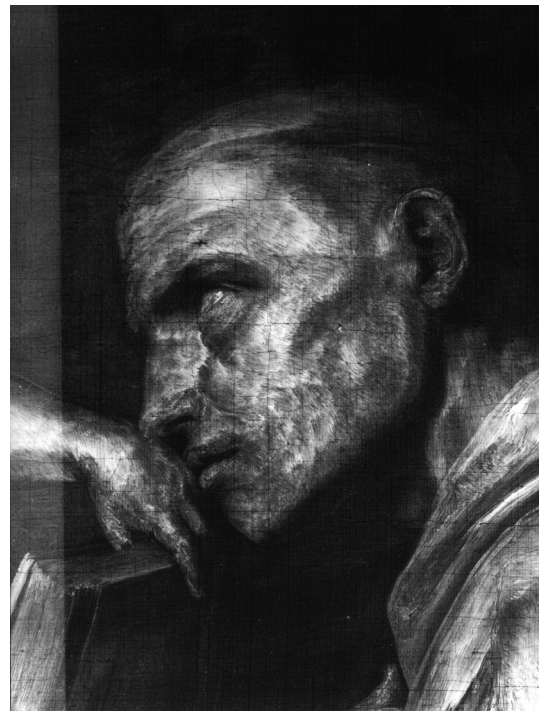


Fig. 3 Jusepe de Ribera, *Virgin with Saint Bruno*. Detail with head of Saint Bruno, 1624. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie SMBPK (X-ray photo by Gerald Schultz, 2002)

1615/16, is quite close to the French followers of Caravaggio, but includes a head of a woman in profile that still can be found in Ribera's *Female Battle* dated 1636, while her headdress was reused with one of the executioners of the above-mentioned *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. And the Toronto *Saint Jerome* is so close in manner to some of the Flemish painters working in Italy that Spinosa once proposed to disregard the authentic Ribera signature and to give it to Crabeth instead; the Strasbourg canvas once had suffered a similar fate.

Concurrent with the Madrid exhibition, Gianni Papi published an article on a Flemish painter who had already adopted Iberian models when Ribera himself was still in Rome – this is, if one accepts Papi's chronology (Il maestro del samaritano, fra Baburen e Ribera, in: *Paragone* 62, 2011, 14-23). However, if Ribera's style would have indeed been adapted by others at this early moment, one might expect that also more clear-cut imitations of his manner were carried out at that stage. This might explain the irritating aspects of a number of paintings presented in the two exhibitions. At the same time, one must not forget that some of the painters Ribera lived and worked with are documented while their production still remains unidentified.

COMPLEX COMPOSITIONS

The role of some complex compositions in the formation of the artist is sometimes even harder to explain. The Langres *Jesus among the Doctors*, attributed to Ribera in the 1638 Giustiniani inventory, looks like a clumsy combination of motives both from the *Judgment of Solomon* and from the Ribera groups, while the treatment of some areas evokes Ribera's later works. If this apparent pastiche really was to date to 1612/13 (Madrid catalogue) or even to 1609/10 (Naples catalogue), the young Ribera would here have been experimenting with inventions that were to make more sense in much later paintings by him, while at a more advanced stage he himself would certainly not have designed such an inexperienced



Fig. 4 Ribera [?], *Portrait of a Man*. Detail. Berlin, Gemäldegalerie SMBPK (X-ray photo by Gerald Schultz, 2002)

composition. The *Susanna with the Elders*, dated by Spinosa ca. 1617/18, offers one identical motif with the Langres picture, but reveals a different treatment. This is somewhat more in line with the mature works of the artist, but above all with the Longhi *Apostolate*. And the Zaragoza *Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*, dated by Papi ca. 1615, while conceived in a much more straightforward manner, combines devices that remind us of other contemporary painters with ideas that we would again expect only in a much later phase of Ribera's career. One might add that coinciding with the Madrid exhibition, the Zaragoza painting was also given to Ribera in an article by Antonio Vannugli (Two new attributions to Jusepe de Ribera, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 153, 2011, 398-404).

Showing many, although far from all works involved in these discussions, the Madrid and Naples exhibitions offered a fascinating insight into the „making of“ of one of the most important Baroque painters. However, they should certainly not mark an end but rather the beginning of further research on Ribera. Of course this implies that all

available material be taken into account – a *Saint Andrew* published in 2005 and now in private hands in France is not even mentioned in either of the catalogues although it belongs to the very few early paintings that carries a signature, and even quite a particular one (*Greco, Velázquez, Goya. Spanische Malerei aus deutschen Sammlungen*. Exh.cat. Hamburg 2005, 76s.). In 2008, Spinosa accepted the work as autograph, but dated it to the 1620s (p. 357, no. A88). The manner looks different and much more self-assured than in most paintings shown in Madrid and Naples, but if we are really dealing with a Ribera, I still think it must be an early one.

That future debates have just begun is shown by Xavier F. Solomon in his review of the Madrid exhibition (The young Ribera, in: *The Burlington Magazine* 153, 2011, 475-478, with additional references). He forcibly divides the works

attributed to Ribera's Roman period into three consecutive phases. One might, though, challenge their coherence, also noting that the author only achieves his aim by the exclusion and later dating of three of the candidates for an early Ribera, the *Susanna with the Elders*, the *Zaragoza Saint Lawrence* – and the *Judgement of Solomon*, that Papi had once started with. Clearly, much remains to be done.

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Something New on Nolde, National Socialism, and the SS

In the book on his friendship with Nolde, published in 1957, the legal scholar and art collector Hans Fehr recalled a threatening encounter with a truculent brown-shirted SA-man in a commercial art gallery in Munich, shortly before Hitler was offered the chancellorship in January 1933. His account of the incident, in which the man had expressed in no uncertain terms what he thought should be done to

modern art, ended: „Wir sahen uns an, sagten kein Wort und betraten das Freie. „Nun kenne ich meine Zukunft“, meinte Nolde mit bewegter Stimme.“ (Hans Fehr, *Emil Nolde: Ein Buch der Freundschaft*, Köln 1957, 136f.) Whether this incident really took place is unknown, but such clairvoyance on the painter's part now seems unlikely, given what scholars have learned over the past four decades. In any case, Fehr certainly neglected to mention another, very different, less useful episode in the „Hauptstadt der Bewegung,“ about which Nolde told him in a letter dated 10 November 1933. That eye-opening document, one of over one hundred letters by Emil and Ada Nolde now in the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute in Los Angeles, California, has not been mentioned in the literature on the painter. It is one of forty-three