

deuten die Tatsache, daß der in allen übrigen Feldern vollkommen einheitliche Hintergrundton hier um ein wenig intensiver ist, sowie die präzisere Ausarbeitung der Einzelheiten (*Abb. 4 a*), als ob der Künstler bei dieser Lünette eine Art Generalprobe für sein Arbeitsvorhaben veranstaltet hätte.

Fabrizio Mancinelli

Ausstellungen

BARTOLOME MURILLO. 1617–1682.

Centenary Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 15. 1.–27. 3. 1983. Catalogue with essays on Murillo's Life and Work, the Seville of his Times, Art and Decline in seventeenth-century Spain, Murillo as a draughtsman, and his impact on painting in Seville and eighteenth-century painting outside Spain

Aficionados, critics and historians outside Spain with an interest in Spanish art have grown accustomed to a meagre diet of exhibitions. But just at the moment, those who are free and have the money to travel can indulge their appetites to the full. Murillo's centenary, which brings together major paintings from Europe and America (and Dresden as well as Munich), and which is at the Royal Academy in London until 27 March, has been served up at the same time as the richer visual and emotional fare of *El Greco and Toledo*, which has just completed its tour in Dallas (Texas). Coincidentally, it has been possible to make quite a meal of *Goya and His Times* at the Meadows Museum, also in Dallas, and to imbibe *Ribera* at the Kimbell Museum in Fort Worth. It is particularly good to be able to compare and contrast the work of three major painters connected with sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Spain, and to ponder their varying fortunes and backgrounds.

The curve of Murillo's reputation is the inverse of El Greco's. The latter rose when the former's fame declined. Murillo's star was high in his own times and throughout the eighteenth century, when his impact on the English School was particularly striking, as Ellis Waterhouse shows in his contribution to the catalogue of the present exhibition. It only began to fall towards the end of the nineteenth century; yet it does not seem to have ceased falling yet, despite important contributions to our knowledge of his art from Diego Angulo, Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño and Jonathan Brown.

Few artists rated such paeans of praise in the early 1800s. The young Disraeli, travelling in Spain in 1830, was struck by his originality. 'No man has painted more, or oftener reached the ideal', he wrote in July that year. 'He never fails. Where can his bad pictures be?'. Later in the century, when realism was the aim of literature as well as art, the Russian traveller, Vassily Botkine, felt that Murillo took his

delectable colours direct from delightful Spanish ladies, and his vaporous atmosphere from African or Southern Spanish sunlight. Yet in 1898, Jozef Israëls, the Dutch artist, expressed his disappointment. 'O sacred Murillo', he wrote, 'you are too sweet for my taste, like pastry that contains too much sugar. I should say there is no real style in your work... With you everything is smooth and nice in colour and form... Rubens, with a single turn, a single smudge of his brush, betrays his character and the idiosyncrasy of his talent. With you, on the other hand, this is replaced by an uniformity of execution that gives one nothing to take hold of: always the same colour-scheme, the same treatment, which makes everything soft and smooth. Dare I call you the painter of pious insipidity?'

Such extremes of praise and blame suggest that there must be a middle way. If there is one, the present exhibition, with seventy-seven paintings of high quality, twenty-four varied and interesting drawings and studies by leading specialists, ought to bring it to light. The paintings on show represent a very wide spread of Murillo's work, spanning forty years of activity and development, from the early *Virgin presenting the Rosary to St Dominic* (1638-40), with its hard-edge outlines and Zurbaranesque folds (No. 1), to the softer contours and vaporous background of *The Martyrdom of St. Andrew* (1675-1682; No. 73). The range of subjects is also wide. There are four portraits and the admirable *Self-Portrait* from London's National Gallery (No. 61); an excellent selection of urchins and peasant girls (seven in all from varying periods); also biblical subjects with a dominating landscape setting which give a very adequate idea of Murillo's capabilities in that area. Furthermore, well-characterized animals abound in these pictures.

It cannot be denied that there are admirable passages in many of these works. The dark green bow at the neck of the yellow dress of *St Justa* (No. 29), and the red bow of *St Rufina* (No. 30) are freely and boldly painted. Even more loosely but just as surely done are the garter on the man's leg in *The Dream of the Patrician* (No. 36), and the twist of red muslin in his wife's hair, although in this case, since the painting was designed to be seen at a distance and from below, Murillo may well have treated the details more broadly than he would normally have done. The silver belt buckle, the lace collar, and the white edging to the coat of *Josua van Belle* (No. 62) are brilliantly illusionistic. Then there is magical lighting in some of the pictures: that in *The Infant St. John the Baptist and the Lamb*, for instance (No. 35), marvellously restrained in its low-key range of greys and browns and whites; or the other *Infant St John* (No. 59), with a similarly dramatic cloud effect; or the pinkish sky in the background of the *Two Boys eating a Pie* (No. 65) from Munich. In one or two paintings the sense of space is also superbly conveyed. The trick of placing dark or half-lit figures at the left in the foreground, making strongly-lit passages in the middle, and passing through alternating zones of dark and light beyond to sharpen the sense of recession, is beautifully executed in *St Thomas of Villanueva* (No. 42), a painting of which the artist himself was justly proud. The lighting of the pair of foreground figures at the left is exquisite. The same perfection occurs in *The Presentation of the Virgin in the Temple* (No. 76).

Elsewhere, though, space is less skilfully suggested and the chiaroscuro is weak. Was the lighting in *San Diego Giving Food to the Poor* (No. 4) once more convincing, perhaps, than it is now? Too many of the paintings, and not only the early ones, feel flat, particularly by the winter daylight of London. But artificial lighting does not altogether strengthen the illusion either. Rather often Murillo creates a frieze of foreground figures, which he pins to a thin and paler background, to imply space.

So far as the religious subjects are concerned, it is easier to explain them than to admire them. The proliferation of *Immaculate Conceptions* is very understandable in a Seville artist in the seventeenth century, brought up on the local enthusiasm for the doctrine, which Andalusian clergy had tried to persuade Rome to accept as a dogma of the Church. Andalusian houses of the period, inscribed with words of homage to the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary, attest the same warmth. Murillo's realistic approach to many religious subjects can equally easily be placed. In making only rare use of haloes (except presumably when a patron required it), and in only occasionally adding auras to saints, Murillo was merely following a trend that started in Italy in the sixteenth century and was well established in Spain by Murillo's time. He certainly goes further than most in that particular line however. Symbolism is present yet unobtrusively handled. The lamb in *The Adoration of the Shepherds* (No. 18), for instance, is less blatantly the sacrificial lamb than it was in Zurbarán or El Greco's versions of the subject. The Christ Child holding a finch out of the reach of a dog in *The Holy Family with the Little Bird* (No. 8) is most probably upholding the faith against materialism, yet the point is made by delicate suggestion rather than by heavy emblem.

At the same time, Murillo's naturalism is less consistent in some other areas. A great many of the gestures in his paintings seem rather stagey, as they were in Zurbarán. They tend to obstruct the sense of movement, and too often make one feel that the actions caught are not designed to be completed. The art of stopping time for a moment, which Velázquez captured to such perfection, tends to elude Murillo. *The Return of the Prodigal Son* (No. 46) succeeds where *The Healing of the Paralytic* does not. *Two Boys eating a Pie* and *Children playing Dice* (Nos. 65 and 66) have a sense of time that is lacking in *Invitation to the Game of Pelota* (No. 67).

Despite these apparent weaknesses, Murillo certainly knew all about art and illusion. He celebrates the subject in his *Self-Portrait*: an intentionally witty play on the illusionistic nature of art, which the engraver who copied the work in the seventeenth century unaccountably failed to recognise. Murillo's whole development and the modification of his technique illustrate his interest in striving to perfect the illusion of reality.

Murillo is not, in fact, as impersonal and sugary as Israëls made out. His urchins have grubby soles to their feet and fleas; not all of them have enough to eat. Some look sad or wistful; not all smile. But suffering in Murillo certainly tends to be something that other people experience; only there so that it can be alleviated by charity. Of his rich or upper-class characters, only the prodigal son appears to

suffer. The amalgam of torn clothing – and the clothing above all tells the story – and bleak landscape and black pigs in the fifth of the Beit collection series (Nos. 47–52), is truly moving and poetic. Yet, of course, the prodigal will be alright in the end, and one supposes that the spectator (especially in the Charity Hospital at Seville) was intended to identify with the father rather than the son. Paradoxically Murillo's naturalism fails to be true to life. His approach seems designed to comfort the wealthy ecclesiastical and secular patrons for whom he worked. It is strong on Grace; weak on Pain and Penitence.

Nigel Glendinning

EINE ZÄHLEBIGE FEHLINTERPRETATION:

ZUM STAND DER KONSTRUKTIVISMUSFORSCHUNG

Ausstellung: Alexander Rodtschenko und Warwara Stepanowa im Wilhelm-Lehmbruck-Museum Duisburg (7. 11. 1982–2. 1. 1983) und in der Kunsthalle Baden-Baden (16. 1.–13. 3. 1983)

Wer aus einigem Abstand die nordrhein-westfälische Kunstszene beobachtet, findet in den letzten Monaten mehr als einen Grund zum Erstaunen. Nach langen Jahren, während derer die Kultur Osteuropas gleichgesetzt war mit dem inoffiziellen Anderssein (was in Bezug auf die 20er Jahre und teilweise die künstlerische Gegenwart grundsätzlich berechtigt war, aber auch noch auf die 30er und 40er Jahre einigermaßen zutrifft), zelebriert man heute – auf einmal – ohne jeden Übergang das, wovon man früher nichts hören wollte. Ausstellungen wie „20 Jahre unabhängige Kunst in der Sowjetunion“ (Museum Bochum 1979) sind längst „unaktuell“ geworden, und bei der Präsentation von Peter Ludwigs russischer Sammlung in Köln und Aachen („Aspekte der sowjetischen Kunst der Gegenwart“, Museum Ludwig 1982) bekamen wir sogar zu hören, daß in der zeitgenössischen Kunst der UdSSR ein „hierzulande üblicher ‚Avantgarde-Begriff‘“ „keine, oder nur kaum eine Rolle spielt“ (Katalog S. 9).

Ludwigs Echo der offiziellen sowjetischen Kunstinterpretation – und leider nicht nur -interpretation, sondern auch -selektion – ist des weiteren von H. Nannen, einem anderen aktiven Touristen durch die Kunstlandschaften der UdSSR, nur unwesentlich modifiziert wiederholt worden (Kunstverein Düsseldorf 1982). Die parallel laufende Retrospektive von Alexander Deineka (Kunsthalle Düsseldorf, Okt. 1982–Jan. 1983) veranlaßte zwar den unabhängigen Kritiker zu Fragen über Analogien zum Kunstvokabular des italienischen und deutschen Faschismus (Eduard Beaucamp, *Stalins Maler*, FAZ vom 8. 12. 1982), die Düsseldorfer Veranstalter aber redeten im Katalog von der „bewußten Teilnahme am ideologischen Klassenkampf“ und vom „operativen Verständnis der künstlerischen Tätigkeit“. Diese „neue Wende“ in der Rußland- und Osteuropasicht ist dabei in manchen Fällen nicht frei von Geschmacklosigkeiten, so z. B., wenn die große vorweihnachtliche Ausstellung Düsseldorfer Künstler („Große Kunstausstellung“ im Düsseldorf-