



Jusepe de Ribera

Martyrdom of St Lawrence 1620–24

Jusepe de Ribera

Spanish 1591-1652, worked in Italy c. 1611 -1652

Martyrdom of St Lawrence 1620-24

oil on canvas on canvas

206.2 cm x 154.5 cm irreg. (image), 207.5 x 155.2 cm (canvas)

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by Allan and Maria Myers and an anonymous donor, 2006 (2006.390)

The painter and printmaker Jusepe de Ribera was born in Valencia, Spain, in 1591. He spent his entire career in Italy, becoming one of the most important figures in European painting in the seventeenth century and one of the major artists of the Counter-Reformation. Ribera was strongly influenced by Caravaggio, a painter of dramatic contrasts of tone and lighting, whose work he saw in Rome and Naples. Although Ribera never returned to Spain, his Spanish identity remained important to him. He frequently signed his work 'hispanus' (Latin for 'Spanish'), '*valentinus*' ('from Valencia') and '*setabensis*' ('from Játiva') and he came to be known as '*lo Spagnoletto*'.

This is Jusepe de Ribera's earliest surviving multi-figure religious composition. It is possible that it was painted as a major altarpiece for the Church of San Lorenzo in Lucina, Rome.

It depicts the martyrdom of Saint Lawrence, which took place in Rome under the persecution of Emperor Valerian on 10 August 258. Saint Lawrence was a Spanish-born Deacon of the church and keeper of its treasure, which is said to have included the Holy Grail. He is often shown by artists in the act of distributing alms to the poor. When he was instructed by the pagan emperor to hand over the valuables of the Church, Saint Lawrence hid the most important Christian relics and divided the remaining wealth among the needy. In a further act of impudence, he then gathered the poor of Rome and presented them to Valerian, declaring them the 'true treasures' of the Church. Valerian immediately ordered his execution. According to traditional accounts, Saint Lawrence was martyred by being roasted alive on a gridiron after severe beating and torture. Lawrence's faith gave him so much strength, however, that he retained consciousness on the gridiron and even asked his executioners to turn him over, explaining that he was 'done' on one side.

Ribera shows Saint Lawrence moments earlier, stripped of his church robes, following his beating, when he has accepted his fate and is contemplating reunion with his maker. Lawrence's left hand points to sprigs of laurel intertwined with a thorny briar along the bottom of the painting. Saint Lawrence's name derives from the Latin *laurentius* or laurelled; the pairing of these two forms may possibly symbolise a parallel between Saint Lawrence's martyrdom and Christ's Passion.

Ribera's renowned talent as a painter of realistic effects is particularly evident in this picture, in the warts and facial imperfections of the torturers and in the bruising and dirty fingernails of their victim. The painting was so admired in its day that at least eight versions of it were subsequently made.

Laurie Benson (adapted by Sophie Matthiesson)

Jusepe de Ribera

Español (1591) –1652, activo en Italia (hacia 1611)–1652

El martirio de San Lorenzo, (1620–24)

óleo sobre lienzo

206,20 cms x 154,50 cms irreg. (imagen), 207,50 x 155,20 cms (lienzo)

Galería Nacional de Victoria, Melbourne

Adquirido con fondos donados por Allan and Maria Myers y un donante anónimo, 2006 (2006.390)

El pintor y grabador Jusepe de Ribera nació en Valencia, España, en 1591. Pasó toda su vida profesional en Italia y llegó a ser una de las figuras más importantes de la pintura europea del siglo XVII y uno de los más destacados artistas de la Contrarreforma. Caravaggio, pintor de dramáticos contrastes de luces y sombras, y cuya obra pudo ver en Roma y Nápoles, tuvo una gran influencia en Ribera. Aunque Ribera nunca volvió a España, su identidad española fue siempre importante para él: con frecuencia firmaba sus obras como "hispanus", "valentinus" o "setabensis" (del latín: español, valenciano, de Játiva, respectivamente) y era conocido como "Lo Spagnoletto".

Este cuadro es el más antiguo que se conserva de Ribera de composición religiosa con múltiples figuras. Es posible que fuera pintado como pieza principal del retablo de la Iglesia de San Lorenzo en Lucina, Roma. Refleja el martirio de San Lorenzo que tuvo lugar el 10 de agosto de 208 en Roma durante la persecución del Emperador Valeriano.

S. Lorenzo, nacido en España, era diácono de la Iglesia y guardián de su tesoro, que, según la tradición, contenía el Santo Grial. A menudo, los artistas lo han representado dando limosnas a los pobres. Cuando el emperador pagano le ordenó que entregara los bienes de la Iglesia, S. Lorenzo escondió los más valiosos y repartió el resto entre los necesitados. Además, en un acto de desafío, reunió a todos los pobres de Roma y los presentó a Valeriano declarando que ellos eran "el verdadero tesoro" de la Iglesia. Valeriano ordenó inmediatamente su ejecución. Según la tradición, fue asado vivo en una parrilla tras haber sido golpeado y torturado severamente, pero su fe le dio tal fuerza que se mantuvo consciente sobre la parrilla e, incluso, pidió a los verdugos que le dieran la vuelta porque ya estaba "hecho" por un lado.

Ribera pinta a S. Lorenzo momentos antes, despojado de su hábito, después de ser azotado, cuando ya había aceptado su destino y esperaba su reunión con el Creador. La mano izquierda de San Lorenzo apunta a un ramo de laurel entrelazado con una zarza espinosa que aparece en la parte de abajo de la pintura. El nombre S. Lorenzo deriva del latín laurentius o laureado y el emparejamiento de estos dos elementos, laurel y espina, probablemente simbolice el paralelismo entre el martirio de San Lorenzo y la Pasión de Cristo.

El famoso talento de Ribera como pintor realista es evidente en esta obra en las verrugas e imperfecciones de las caras de los torturadores y en las heridas y uñas sucias de su víctima. El cuadro fue tan admirado en su época que se hicieron otras ocho versiones sobre el mismo tema.

Thinking and discussing before the visit

- What is a martyr? Discuss all the reasons why depictions of martyrdom have been popular with artists throughout the history of Christianity?
- What effects might seeing an image of martyrdom have had on viewers in the seventeenth century? Why might those effects be different today?
- The Fine Arts Museum of Seville has an extensive collection of works by the seventeenth-century religious artist Francisco de Zurbarán, some of which are online.
- Locate his painting of *La Virgen de las Cuevas*, c.1655, using the following:
http://www.juntadeandalucia.es/cultura/museos/MBASE/index.jsp?redirect=S2_3_1_1.jsp&idpieza=47&pagina=2
- In what ways has the artist emphasised the importance of the Virgin.
- What elements of the painting suggest sadness?
- How has the artist suggested balance and harmony? What might they symbolise in the context of this painting?
- Which other elements of the painting could be interpreted as symbols of meaning?
- Describe the colours the artist has used. How do they contribute to the mood and message of the painting?
- How might illiterate seventeenth-century viewers looking at this work for the first time have reacted?
- Locate and discuss paintings by Abstract Expressionist artist Mark Rothko (1903–1970) who aimed to create a calm, contemplative atmosphere in his art, which communicated a powerful spiritual experience.
- The artist expressed his intention in the following statement: 'The people who weep before my pictures are having the same religious experience I had when I painted them. And if you are moved only by the colour relationships, then you miss the point'.
- Discuss the reasons that may explain why artists today are less likely to depict religious imagery than in the past.

Gallery visit activities

- What are your first thoughts when you look at the painting? How does it make you feel?
- What does it make you wonder?
- Describe what you can see? What do you think is happening?
- What clues in the painting suggest how Saint Lawrence will be executed?
- What evidence is there to suggest that Saint Lawrence has already been mistreated?
- If you pressed 'play', what would happen next, if you pressed 'rewind', what would you see?
- How has the artist used tone to great effect in this painting. Consider three-dimensional form, atmosphere and deliberate focus on particular parts of the painting.
- How has the artist suggested that Saint Lawrence has accepted his fate and put his trust in God? Consider the expression on his face, the direction of his gaze and his body language.
- Create a newspaper headline that encapsulates the action and ideas suggested by the painting.

Why do you believe art from different times and cultures has played an important role in religion and spiritual life? Consider images from Ancient Greek, Roman and Egyptian civilizations, Aboriginal cultures and world religions such as Christianity and Buddhism. Discuss the purpose and the context in which they were displayed.

Useful link

<http://www.blakeprize.com.au/>

Research and discuss works of art by finalists in the Blake Prize, the oldest art prize in Australia dedicated to spirituality, religion and cultural diversity. Compare the mediums and materials the artists used. Discuss in what ways they are different and similar.

Discuss to what extent art can inspire us. Prepare an illustrated talk or a newspaper article describing a work of art that has caused you to have this experience (it may not necessarily be categorised as 'religious' art).

Chiaroscuro is a term in art for contrast between areas of lightness and darkness. Why might the artist have used it in this painting?

Gallery visit activities, continued

- Saint Lawrence's name is derived from the Latin *laurentius* or laurelled. Why might the artist have intertwined sprigs of laurel leaf with a thorny vine along the bottom edge of the painting?
- Look at the painting close up and from the other side of the gallery. How do the different views alter your perception of the painting?
- Describe the surface texture of the paint. How might the artist have achieved this degree of smoothness?
- The painting was probably displayed in a dark church. What qualities would candlelight have added to the painting?
- Discuss the consecutive processes the artist would have worked through in order to realise the finished painting.
- Why might the artist have made this painting? Consider who may have commissioned it and why.
- What does the painting reveal about the artist himself?
- How might this painting be perceived differently by an atheist or someone from a non-Christian background?
- To what extent is this image of martyrdom still relevant today?
- While in the gallery, visit another religious painting by Spanish artist Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682) entitled *The Immaculate Conception* c.1665.

Post-visit activities

- Using libraries and the internet, research the life and works of José de Ribera.
- Research the life and works of Italian seventeenth-century artist Caravaggio. What elements of his work suggest that he strongly influenced Ribera?

Christ of St John of the Cross, 1951, is a famous religious painting by the Spanish artist Salvador Dalí. It is owned by the Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow, and has been reproduced many times in books, as posters and on the internet.

Locate the image in a book or on the following website:

<http://www.theglasgowstory.com/image.php?inum=TGSE00477>

- Describe the unusual angle from which Christ has been painted. Why might Dalí have chosen this view?
- Why might Dalí have chosen not to show Christ's face?
- What makes Dalí's painting significantly different from traditional portrayals of the crucifixion? Consider what elements Dalí has left out which are normally visible.
- Discuss what you believe Dalí's intention was when he painted this image.

What does the light from the fire emphasise about the executioners' faces?

Why might this particular martyrdom of Saint Lawrence have been popular with artists? (Titian, Tintoretto and Zurbarán have all painted versions of this subject.) Consider the opportunities it allows artists to display their talents.

Locate Ribera's painting, *Jacob's Dream*, 1620, based on a story from the Old Testament at the Prado Museum in Madrid. Compare it with *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence*. List all the differences and similarities you can find.

<http://www.museodelprado.es/en/ingles/collection/on-line-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/jacobs-dream/>

Compare Ribera's painting, *The Martyrdom of Saint Lawrence* with other famous depictions of the crucifixion, including Spanish artists such as Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618–1682), Francisco de Goya y Lucientes (1746–1828) and Pablo Picasso (1881–1973). Picasso's *Crucifixion*, 1930, can be located at the following website:

<http://www.abcgallery.com/P/picasso/picasso96.html>

In each case consider the following: The purpose of the image, the materials and techniques, representation of the figures and space, and evidence of symbolism.