

Kiana Hieda

Mr. Reppun

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Mortality Wake-Up Call - *St Jerome and the Angel of Judgment* (1626)



Jusepe (José) de Ribera's *St Jerome and the Angel of Judgment* (1626) demonstrates a true mastery of light and shading. This mastery brings our attention to the humanistic details, such as the Saint's wrinkled skin, the angel's arm muscles, and the red cloth's folds, which we cannot help but admire. But who is the Saint, and what story has Ribera captured? In *El Greco to Murillo: Spanish Painting in the Golden Age*, author Nina Ayala Mallory believes the angel who compelled the saint, St Jerome—identified by the veiled lion to his right—to live hermitically in the desert to translate the Bible from Hebrew to Latin (91). In Ribera's painting, the angel has returned to check on his progress, while holding the trumpet of the Last Judgment, which Rosa Giorgi, author of *Angels and Demons in Art*, explains is used by the angel of the Apocalypse (354). Furthermore, the trumpet "stimulates reflection about death, when the soul rejoins God" (354). This motif was particularly prevalent during Ribera's time, the Counter-Reformation (354). He depicts St Jerome as an elderly, shamefaced man who remains unfinished in his work. In addition, Mallory suggests that the strongly

illuminated silhouettes that contrast against the dark background are arranged in diagonal patterns that come together in the foreground plane of a shallow layer of space (90). This approach has the effect of placing the expansive gestures of the protagonists into a somewhat geometric pattern, giving them an expressive authority similar to that found in Classical Greek sculpture (90). Furthermore, in his news article, *Baroque Futurist to Jusepe de Ribera*, Robert Hughes explains that the yellowed skull quietly sitting on a stack of scriptures may be a reminder to St Jerome (and to the viewer) of his mortality (Hughes 2). A strong Catholic of Játiva, Spain, Ribera departed for Rome in search of Caravaggesque stimulation (Mallory 86)—a radical naturalistic style of painting originated by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, in which a physical observation and dramatic approach to chiaroscuro is combined with the use of light and shadow ("Caravaggio")—which he clearly utilizes in his work. Art historians Emil Kren and Daniel Marx explain that Ribera's signature varied on his pieces as a result to the several nicknames he adopted while in Italy; one of them being "Lo Spagnoletto," meaning "Little Spaniard."

Pity for the Imperfect - *The Assumption of Magdalen* (1626)

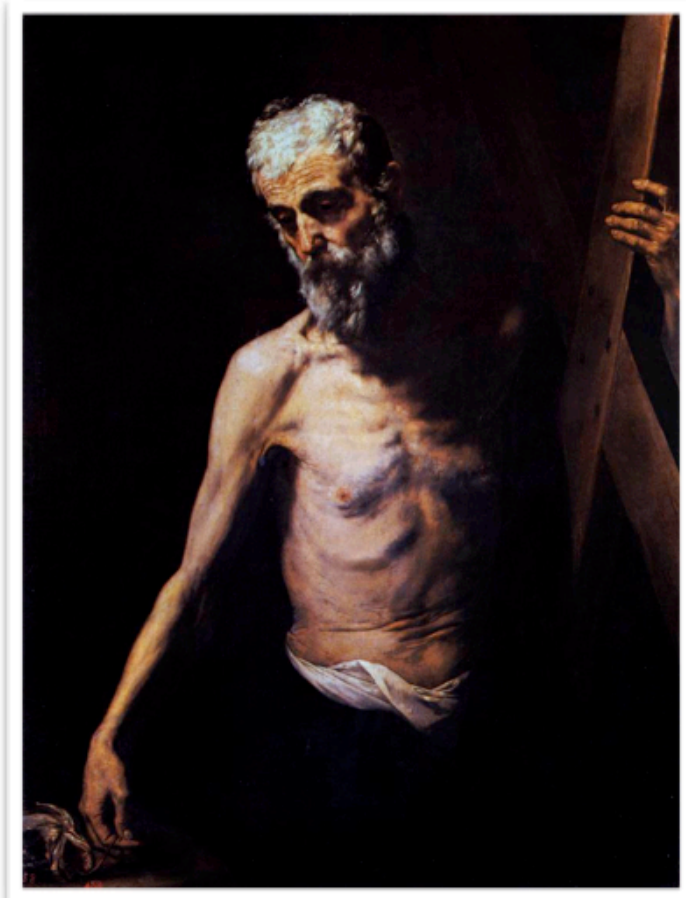
José Gudiol, author of *Spanish Painting*, notes that *The Assumption of Magdalen*, one of Ribera's earliest paintings, is a fine example in the Hispanic Society of America (84). Here, Ribera demonstrates what would soon become one of his greatest weapons: tenebrism—derived from the Italian *tenebroso*, meaning “murky” (“Tenebrism”). This technique employs “dramatic illumination, using violent contrasts of light and dark” (“Tenebrism”). Furthermore, we find a similarity between *The Assumption of Magdalen* and *St Jerome and the Angel of Judgement*: the red cloth Mary Magdalen drapes around herself, which contrasts nicely against the murky blue background sky, is akin to St Jerome's red cloth. In addition, Ribera, being a Caravagisti, often demonstrated evident light sources in his paintings. Sarah Carr-Gomm, author of *The Dictionary of Symbols in Western Art*, explains that the “Caravagisti (including Caravaggio himself) often



included a source of light external to the composition to suggest the divine illuminating the chosen” (134). Perhaps this painting documents Christ's forgiving of Mary Magdalen, for Catholics viewed her as a “changed prostitute” (147). Having sinned, she begged for forgiveness by washing Christ's feet with her tears, wiping them with her hair, and anointing them (147). Gudiol later notes that while “serving under the patronage of the Duke of Osuna, Viceroy of Naples, Ribera executed majority of his religiously inspired pieces for Spanish destination” (84). In fact, René Huyghe, editor of *Larousse Encyclopedia of Renaissance and Baroque Art*, notes that the Baroque style was used at first in Rome and Spain (by the Jesuits in particular), as means of emotional persuasion and religious propaganda (186). Henceforth art no longer “targeted the sensitive appreciation of the elite, but the broad masses of the faithful” (186). Perhaps this is true to a certain extent, for Ribera painted a couple decades after the initiation of the Baroque movement. However, as one of his earlier works, *The Assumption of Magdalen* remains strongly Catholic in its representations. Magdalen's central position and delicate facial lighting is clearly poignant, evoking the humanistic attributes Ribera continued to skillfully execute in his work.

A New Light - *St Andrew* (1630-32)

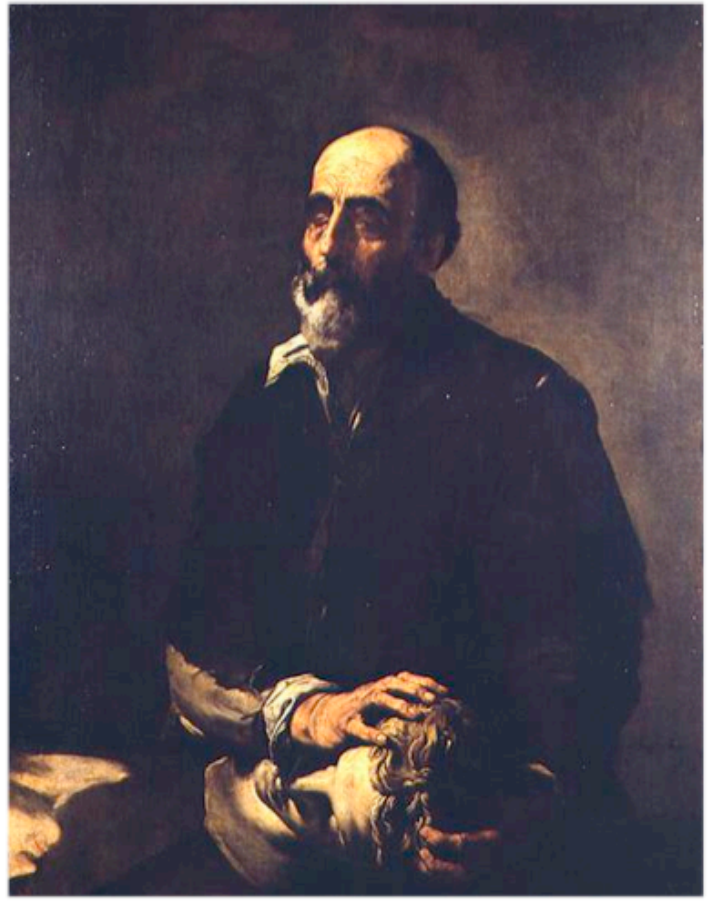
In the 1630's, Ribera continued to perfect his use of lighting. *St Andrew* demonstrates his keen eye for detail, which Hughes suggests, is "essential in a cellar painting—paintings of models transfixed by a single-point source of light" (2). Ribera, along with other artists of the Neapolitan Period, often employed this technique in which he painted the model in darkness with a window that let only a "single ray of sun" (2). This "emphasized their poses and gestures by creating drama and a degree of abstraction" (2). Furthermore, Mallory notes that *St Andrew* falls into "a category of pictures...very much in vogue among the intellectuals and collectors of Ribera's day" (92). This category, the "imaginary portraits of the philosophers—or saints—of antiquity... sometimes used unidentifiable subjects, but as characterizations of individual men they are unforgettable images" (92). At this time, Spanish Viceroy ruled the Kingdom of Naples ("Jusepe de Ribera"). In *History of Art*, author H.W. Jansen notes that "while municipal authorities...provided a certain amount of art patronage...there was no shrinkage of output" (570). He later adds, "the general public developed so insatiable an appetite for pictures that the whole country became gripped by a kind of collectors' mania" (570). We recognize that indeed this is St Andrew, a widely known religious figure among all European Catholics; however, it seems as though Ribera wanted to



glorify him in a new light; a humanistic light. St Andrew's stringy build is so precise, even down to the folds of skin, that we can only assume Ribera used an actual model of such a condition. Hughes suggests he perhaps found him on the street, in his tattered, demalio clothes, and paid him for his time (3). Furthermore, Ribera mastered the finer details, such as the light reflecting off of the Saint's gleaming white hair, which appears as both delicate and realistically textured. St Andrew's collar bone, sternum, ribcage, and nose bridge add an element of humanism, along with the twisted skin on his lower torso. "His forms, though ordinary and sometimes coarse, are correct; the impression of his works gloomy and startling" ("Jusepe de Ribera"). *St Andrew* clearly carries mystery within its darkness. The delicately focused expression and absence of obvious eye contact leaves the viewer curious and unknowingly focused as well.

A Glance at Sensation - *Sense of Touch* (1632)

In addition to Ribera's taste for gloom and mystery, Louis Gillet, author of *Jusepe de Ribera* in the 13th volume of *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, argues that "nothing is so personal to Ribera as [the] love for deformity" (1). This interest is continuously evident in his other paintings such as *The Bearded Woman* (1630), *The Clubfooted Boy* (1642), and *Dwarf with a Dog* (1643). However, Craig Felton and William B. Jordan, editors of *Jusepe de Ribera*, suggest that "*Sense of Touch* (1632) in particular, "...dramatically heightened the impact of his subject by presenting a blind man...who is unable to see the painting of a man's head lying...on the table in front of him. The intense concentration expressed by his face focuses our imaginations on the contact between his fingertips and the surface of the marble he holds" (97). Ribera perhaps placed the man's hands specifically on the



sculpture's hair to offer a more textured form of contact. This way, the viewer can easily distinguish an actual sensation. In their book *Ribera*, authors Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez and Nicola Spinosa note that "it was once considered a portrait of the blind sculptor, Giovanni Gomelli di Gambassi (1603-1664)" (98). Furthermore, the Escorial inventory of 1700 related it to other philosophers and wise men, or "heroes of Sciences and Arts" (98). In 1764, Padre Ximénez, in his description of the Escorial stated, "He [the blind man] examines, by means of touch, the Symmetry and Features of a still-incomplete head that he holds between his hands" (qtd. in Sánchez and Spinosa 98). Again, we see Ribera's classic use of Caravaggesque lighting to produce defined detail in the man's clothing, hands, and face. His eyelids are worn, and his facial expression is somewhat detached, however, his mind is racing. His tattered sleeves and lined hands suggest a long history of discoveries made by his sense of touch. Sánchez and Spinosa suggest some speculation that Ribera used an actual blind man as a model for this piece (98). Furthermore, we observe the physical similarities between the subjects in Ribera's *Sense of Touch* and *Blind Beggar and His Boy* (1632). Gudiol notes that by this time, "Ribera endeavored to portray a real expression of...suffering" (84).

For the Love of God? - *The Clubfooted Boy* (1642)

Ribera's infatuation with revealing the flaws which make us human grew tremendously. He exposed the part of the mirror society did not want to see. Ribera's *Clubfooted Boy* brought suffering to light, depicting a young peasant with a malformed foot. He carries an excessively long, well-crafted walking stick which seems unfit for his height. The young boy may have stole the walking stick from a village elder for his own purposes. Influenced from much around him, Ribera observed the violence and grinding poverty around him in Naples. For instance, if any of Ribera's subjects are captured smiling in his paintings, we instantly take notice to the horrific dental hygiene of each subject. We see this in *The Clubfooted Boy*, in which the peasant has swollen gums, small decaying teeth, and a grayish tint to each tooth. Although his living conditions seem ill-fated, we cannot help but notice his cheerful disposition. Here we see Ribera's influence by the Humanist movement initiated during the Renaissance, when man began to take more interest in man, and sought to represent more humanly gestures and movements in art. However, religion did not entirely disappear from the picture, especially for a

strong
Spanish

Catholic like Ribera. He enjoyed hiding secret texts within his pieces. Sometimes you'd even find his name on shriveled pieces of paper lining the floor of his subjects, passing as virtually unnoticeable. However *The Clubfooted Boy* obviously presents the text. For in his left hand the peasant boy holds a piece of paper containing the Latin words: *DA MIHI ELIMOSINAM PROPTER AMOREM DEI*, meaning, "Give me alms for the love of God." In other words, the paper suggests that the peasant boy is seeking food or money from those who pity him before the eyes of God. However, we must wonder, what does it take for an illiterate peasant to beg for his own survival? This piece therefore contains an underlying tone of pity towards those suffering under unbelievably poor conditions.



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