

Introduction

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652) was an artist from the town of Jativa near Valencia who lived and worked in Spanish viceregal Naples. Known in Italy as “Lo Spagnoletto” (little Spaniard), Ribera was famous among contemporaries for his oil paintings and etchings depicting scenes of abjection, from the distressed epidermis of Saint Jerome to the flayed bodies of Marsyas and Saint Bartholomew. Throughout his career, Ribera demonstrated a propensity to repeat pictorial compositions to the point of redundancy. My project began when I noted a systematic pattern of repetition in Ribera’s catalogue raisonné (fig. 2). A simple search on the internet will produce the same results. A glimpse at the matrix of thumbnail photos of Ribera’s easel paintings and graphic work reveals obsessive replication, not only in painted copies but also in the compositions of signature works. Repetition and seriality revealed a pattern in which the human figure, as a shape with extended members occupying pictorial space, was bound

to the edges of mobile easel paintings and prints. In tandem with my interest in the artist’s morphological commitments, I have been engaged with describing the surfaces of Ribera’s oil paintings.

For Ribera, etching was a repeatable and mobile material practice held in concert with easel painting. Repetition of figurative compositions arose, I argue in the pages that follow, not only from workshop copying practices (there are no fewer than eight painted copies or variants of Ribera’s early painting of Saint Lawrence) but also from the iterative practice of printmaking. The repetition, rotation, and reversal of figures in his paintings emerged from the lessons of printmaking and the transfer of the image. Because of the circulation of his independent etchings and copies after his paintings, Ribera was known throughout seventeenth-century Europe and ultimately the Spanish colonies. As Rose Marie San Juan pithily states, “in early modern Europe images start to move.”¹ In this book I argue that the extension of the artist’s agency through mechanical repetition is best understood in the context of global expansion and Spanish Empire. The printmaker-painter “Spagnoletto” was a subject of the Spanish viceroy of Naples who, like other temporary revolving administrators of the

FIG. 1 | Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Sebastian*, 1651, detail. Oil on canvas. Museo Nazionale di Capodimonte, Naples. Photo: author.



FIG. 2 | Alfonso E. Perez Sanchez and Nicola Spinosa, *L'Opera completa del Ribera* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1978), detail. Photo: author.

global Spanish Empire, served as a double of the monarch. I also argue that the ostensible authority and immutability of mechanical reproduction was never fully secure as an imperial technology.

For Ribera, beginning in his early career, etching was a site of material experimentation in which the artist rotated the copper plate as he inscribed its surface. The medium is paradoxical. On the one hand, applying a needle to the soft wax ground covering the copper plate permits a fluidity of movement unavailable to engraving, which requires the exertion of systematic pressure by a burin. In comparison with engraving, which relies on cross-hatching to register tone and the depiction of surface structure or texture, etching permits a greater variation of the width, length, and frequency of linear inscription from which we infer duration and velocity. Etching approximates ink drawing. On the other hand, unlike drawing, the medium involves a complex technical process: a wax ground is incised, the exposed copper plate is bitten by mordant, the ground is removed, a uniform layer of oily printer's ink is applied to the plate then wiped, and paper covers the inscribed plate. The artist's touch is

hidden under a moist blanket, laid on the press bed, where mechanical pressure impresses the paper into the grooves on the copper surface. The process results in a delay and conceptual distance between the initial gesture and the unseen and immediate resolution of the image. For Ribera, the plate's rotation on the workshop table facilitated the investigation of compositions and an understanding of figures with respect to the edge of the support. In the printing process, figures are reversed, offering mirroring alternatives. Side by side, plates and multiples suggested continuous narratives, as if the movements of figures were internally motivated. In addition to these morphological commitments, the caustic process rehearsed indexical surface structures that, when transposed to paintings, explored human skin and haptic perception.²

Ribera's formal and material processes were not, however, hermetically sealed in the studio. After establishing an early studio practice in Rome, Ribera moved to Naples, where he received patronage from five Spanish viceroys over three decades. Many of Ribera's works were exported to Spain, packed with the furnishings

of the returning viceroys. Recent art historical scholarship has importantly explored the visual culture of seventeenth-century Naples.³ My stress is that the artist participated in a global Spanish Empire. Jesuit missionaries and colonial administrators referred to southern Italy as *Otras Indias*. Indeed, the Catholic internal mission and the viceregal political order were mutually conceived in terms of *imperium* as a “composite kingdom.”⁴ Like Peru and New Spain (Mexico), Naples was administered by a global political system, the viceroyalty. The king of Spain appointed viceroys to serve as his proxies or body doubles (*Altra nos*) in a global empire extending from the Philippines to southern Italy.⁵ As a result, there was not a clear conceptual or representational distinction between Naples and the Americas or Asia.

Ribera’s work may be understood in relation to specific local visual, scientific, literary, religious, and political cultures of Naples, which were imbricated in multidirectional transatlantic histories and practices. Even naming the artist raises difficulties. Ribera’s signed works register a complex set of geographic relations and linguistic identifications as a migrant Spaniard who spent his life in Naples, which was part of the Spanish Empire. His works were inscribed “fecit,” thereby stressing material practice over invention. He signed his works alternatively Iusepe, Josephus or “Ribera Hispanus,” often using the abbreviated Hispanic epithet “Spañol.” (Spagnolo/lo spagnoletto).⁶ Along with his signature, he inscribed shifting references to his birthplace Jativa or Valencia (*Valentinus civitatis*), Naples as the ancient pre-Roman Imperial Greek colony Parthenope, and the artist’s academy of Saint Luc in Rome. Jusepe de Ribera was an Iberian immigrant who served a Spanish colonial

administration and was a permanent resident of Naples married to a Neapolitan. In a recent essay Helen Hills has importantly drawn attention to the role of colonial silver extraction by enslaved Africans in seventeenth-century Neapolitan material culture.⁷ My book responds to the colonial and material turns in early modern studies by stressing the roles of technologies, scientific and religious communities, and cultural transfer in an individual artist’s practice.

This book has five chapters roughly organized chronologically, providing an overview of the artist’s oeuvre as a series of case studies. These chapters are also organized by intersecting themes or keywords involving migration, metamorphosis, violence, trauma, and abjection. Chapter 1 introduces Ribera’s early series of half-length (*mezze figure*) paintings from the 1610s in Rome (philosophers, saints, and apostles); chapter 2 describes the series of five paintings dedicated to the senses; chapter 3 concerns his paintings and early etchings from the 1620s produced in Naples that depict Saint Jerome; chapter 4 focuses on a decorative project representing biblical prophets and patriarchs for a major Neapolitan monastery, the Certosa di San Martino, begun in 1637; chapter 5 discusses Ribera’s monumental paintings exported to Madrid for the Spanish monarch (*Tityus* and *Ixion*, 1632); and, finally, chapter 6 interrogates an ink-and-wash drawing of the martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew made shortly after the Revolt of Naples (1647–48), which revisits an early etching of the same theme in 1624.

In chapter 1, I describe Ribera’s early works as multiple series of *mezze figure*, the half-figure easel paintings endemic to the speculative art market in early seventeenth-century Rome.

Ribera established his reputation among Spanish clients by executing multiple series of paintings, including philosophers, saints, and the apostles. The first two chapters draw on scholarship in the history of science and collections. I situate Ribera's work within the scientific and political societies of Rome and viceregal Naples, which served the interests of the Spanish Empire.⁸ The first two chapters address the density of Ribera's social relations in Naples and take seriously the imbrication of natural philosophy in the Spanish Empire by underscoring, for example, the seventeenth-century publications of a monumental Mexican botanical and zoological project commissioned by King Philip II in the mid-sixteenth century, the *Animalia Mexicana* (1628) and the *Rerum medicarum Novae Hispaniae thesaurus (Tesoro Mexicano)* (1651).⁹ These books were based on the knowledge of Indigenous informants in New Spain (Mexico); their illustrated manuscripts were in turn published by Roman and Neapolitan members of the Accademia dei Lincei with the assistance of Spanish and Criollo intellectuals living in Rome. As Antonio Barrera-Osorio argues, colonized "specialized personnel," in a Weberian sense, assigned to "information collection," did not emerge initially from the demands of capitalism but rather from empire. Ribera was one of these "specialized personnel" in his capacity as an artist and as an imperial organic intellectual.¹⁰

Chapter 2 discusses Ribera's investigation of the philosophical and physiological relationship between haptic and visual sensation in early modern Italy. In the set of five *mezzo figure* paintings depicting the five senses, his representation of human perception participated in contemporary materialist discourses informed by the

ancient philosopher Lucretius, whose highly influential poem *De rerum natura* contended that all sensation is haptic. Ribera's investigation of human perception participated in the empirical discourses and pictorial practices of scientific communities that emerged in Rome and Naples, most notably those associated with the Accademia dei Lincei.

Whereas chapters 1 and 2 discuss the impact of scientific communities and Spanish viceregal networks on Ribera's production and reception, chapter 3 explores the relationship between Spanish imperial religious practices and the artist's representation of Saint Jerome. While much of the literature on early Iberian colonialism turns to the Franciscan and Jesuit orders, this chapter interrogates the place of the monastic order of Saint Jerome—the Hieronymites—in the Spanish Empire. The Hieronymites enjoyed a special relationship with the Spanish monarchy by receiving royal patronage at the Monastery of Guadalupe in Extremadura (Spain) and the Monastery of El Escorial (Madrid). The monastic order also exercised an important role in the Spanish Americas. In addition to having the monopoly on printing in the Hispanic world, the Hieronymites were the first governors of Hispaniola, present-day Haiti and the Dominican Republic.¹¹ The order transferred the cult of *Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* from Extremadura to New Spain. As Jeanette Petersen has argued, prints played a central role in the transmission and metamorphosis of Our Lady of Guadalupe from patron of the Reconquista (the Christian reconquest of Spain from the Muslim Caliphate) to her association with the Spanish conquest of Mexico.

Chapter 3 considers the relationship between eremitic asceticism's practice of severe

self-discipline (bondage, flagellation) and material degradation. J. Michelle Molina has described the central role of the Jesuit order and Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises* in colonial subject formation.¹² My argument considers the contradictions of the Hieronymite disciplinary construction of a Self and an imperial subject through self-abnegation and abjection. During the artist's working life, as he repeatedly turned to representing the ascetic condition and the human body under states of duress, the materials and processes of etching offered a formal vocabulary for the representation of the hermit saint: inscription, incision, weaving, wrapping, binding, compression, distress, repetition, reversal, and so on.

Chapter 4 bridges the worlds of the first three chapters that have more recently been treated separately, discursively, as "science" and "religion." In the Carthusian monastery overlooking the Bay of Naples, Ribera's painted decorative program of prophets and patriarchs framed by the stone revetments was informed by the demands of both natural philosophy and monasticism. Beginning in 1637, the artist executed a series of patriarchs and prophets as Old Testament prefigurations of Christian eschatology in the Certosa di San Martino. Surrounded by inlaid stone, Ribera's embedded oil-on-canvas figures negotiate the physical constraints of their nonfigurative "ornamental" surrounds. Ribera's collaboration with the sculptor Cosimo Fanzago (1591–1678) explored the borders of stone and the human at the site of a recent incendiary volcanic eruption. This chapter investigates issues of abstraction and figuration, human and nonhuman ontologies, and organic and inorganic materiality.

Ribera's immersion of human bodies in geological time proposed an alternative

eschatology to that offered by early modern *quadratura* religious ceiling painting. In addition to discussing theological discourses regarding ornament, this chapter explores the contemporary scientific debates regarding the organic or inorganic origins of stone. For early modern Italian natural philosophers, the organic genesis of fossils was theologically controversial. Ribera's project was informed by the indeterminate relation between living and nonliving matter as well as autogenous and divine creation.

In chapter 5, I discuss Ribera's representation of classical mythology for the Habsburg monarch, which was rooted in the Iberian myth of the Reconquista and Spain's ongoing conflict with Islam. In 1632, Ribera's monumental paintings depicting the eternal punishment of the infernal mythological figures Tityus and Ixion (Prado) were exported to Philip IV's palace, Buen Retiro, near Madrid. Ribera emulated a series of mid-sixteenth-century paintings by Titian, now collectively known as the "Furies," in which the Venetian artist investigated bound bodies immobilized by pain.

This chapter interrogates the relationship between the iterated representation of an inert, agonized body, the putative autonomy of art, and the material conditions of transported easel paintings and reproductive prints in the Habsburg empire. Bruno Latour's claim that prints are "immutable mobiles" is useful for thinking about the cultural transfer of images under the conditions of empire.¹³ My stress is on the condition of mutability and material loss in relation to Ribera's scientific, religious, and political projects. Ribera's mobilized, rotating figures in his etchings were subject to the entropic effects of repetitive material practices. Ribera's pictorial

compositions that were structured by these disfigured bodies anticipated the conditions of their own potential (or inevitable) mobility, violent displacement, material mutability, disfiguration, and circulation as objects and prints.

The sixth and final chapter considers Ribera's late retrospective practice, involving self-referential repetition, a return to an etching of the flaying of Saint Bartholomew made twenty-five years earlier, and the subsequent inscription of violence and traumatic memory in a drawing. Jusepe/José Ribera was a Spanish immigrant and

permanent resident of the Neapolitan viceroyalty whose ambiguous identity underwent a crisis during the Revolt of Naples (1647–48), which was a violent popular challenge to the Spanish monarchy. At a time when Ribera was alienated from Spanish viceregal patronage, he explored his ambivalence toward coercive imperial rule and the problem of resemblance. This final chapter engages with the issues of trauma, memory, and repression. My emphasis is on traumatic repetition-compulsion as material processes of inscription.