

Jusepe de Ribera and the Dissimulation of Sight

Paper abstract

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My overarching research program discusses seventeenth-century Central Italian painting as the site of epistemological subversion. In the Italian Academy project, the contribution of the Hispano-Neapolitan painter Jusepe/José de Ribera to the treatment of these issues will be analyzed. Early in his career, in his Roman years, Ribera was one of the most direct followers of Caravaggio; however, later on he evolved into a fully individual artistic personality, and developed further some of Caravaggio's innovations.

Most current research on Ribera concentrates on filling in the lacunae in the artist's biography, on describing the change of style that arguably occurred around 1635 from darker, "naturalist" paintings to a more idealistic, classical style, and on discussing Ribera's confused "national" character as a Spanish-born artist working in Spanish-ruled Naples to patrons both Spanish and Italian.

My project will attempt to interpret Ribera's art in terms of its epistemological stance on questions of sensorial perception, information transmission and opaque mimesis. Iconographical depictions of the senses are a convenient starting point, but I would like to show how Ribera's pictorial interest in these issues can be detected even in works whose subject matter is more diverse.

Some specific points of interest: Ribera's depiction of figures' eyes, often covered with thick shadows and thus invisible to the spectator's gaze and complicating the visual network within the diegetic space of the work; sustained interest in sight deficiencies; and emphasis on haptic elements such as skin textures.