

49 Francisco de Zurbarán
(Fuente de Cantos, Badajoz 1598–1664 Madrid)
Hercules and Cerberus

1634
Oil on canvas, 132 × 151 cm
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, P-1247

Provenance: Palacio del Buen Retiro, Madrid, 1701 (no. 260); Palacio del Buen Retiro, Madrid, 1794 (no. 531).

Selected bibliography: J. M. Serrera in Serrera 1988, 244, no. 43; Caturla 1994, 114; L. Ruiz Gómez in Úbeda de los Cobos 2005, 164, no. 33; Brown and Elliott 2016, 222; Japón 2020b, 182.

This was one of a series of ten paintings – all now in the Museo del Prado – commissioned from Francisco de Zurbarán in 1634 to decorate the area over the windows of the Salón de Reinos (Hall of Realms) in the Buen Retiro palace, whose iconographical programme also included a set of royal portraits and battle scenes by various artists. In the case of Zurbarán's paintings, the composition, framing, and modelling of the figures reflect the fact that all these canvases were to be hung at a height of over three metres and against the light.

The cycle was connected to an iconographical tradition instituted by the Habsburg dynasty in Spain during the reign of Charles V, intended to highlight their claimed descent from Hercules. But it is also related to two other monumental series focussing on the Theban hero, both exceptional for their time. The first is a set of ten canvases, albeit in different formats, painted by Frans Floris (c. 1519–1570) in Antwerp around 1553.¹ Floris' cycle – for which there was no precedent in the Northern pictorial tradition – was commissioned by the merchant Nicolaas Jonghelinck (1517–1570) for one of the rooms in his suburban villa. Jonghelinck belonged to a family in the service of the Habsburgs; his brother Jacob Jonghelinck (1530–1606) held the post of sculptor and medallist to Philip II of Spain. In a letter written in 1571 to the royal secretary Gabriel de Zayas, the humanist Benito Arias Montano noted that the king himself had been impressed by the cycle during his sojourn in the Netherlands; he added that the pictures were then in Brussels – at the house of Jacob Jonghelinck, who had inherited them from his brother – and recommended that the king purchase them.² Zurbarán would have been familiar with them through ten prints by Cornelis Cort (1533–1578), which went through several editions, starting in 1563;³ he may well have taken them as the basis for his own compositions, and particularly for his depiction of Cerberus.⁴



The second monumental series to which Zurbarán's cycle is related is a set of four paintings depicting scenes from the Labours of Hercules, painted by Guido Reni between 1617 and 1621 for Ferdinando Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, and intended for the Villa La Favorita. Reni's *Hercules slaying the Hydra of Lerna* of about 1620–21⁵ displays certain marked stylistic affinities, particularly as regards colour, with Zurbarán's *Hercules and Cerberus*.⁶ These similarities, however, may be due simply to chance, and to a common environment or *Zeitgeist*, rather

than indicating any direct link. Both series focus on the virtues of the hero as a reflection of those of the prince, while the use of chiaroscuro enhances a Christian moral reading in which the central figure vanquishes vice and defeats the enemies of the faith. Zurbarán is unlikely to have had access to Reni's composition, through either copies or prints. The Mantua paintings were sold in 1627, along with the rest of the Duke's collection, to Charles I of England, and remained in his possession until his death in 1649. The first known engraving

of the Reni painting was made by Gilles Rousselet (1610–1686) in around 1677, when the picture was in the collection of Louis XIV of France.⁷ However, Zurbarán may possibly have seen some sketch or drawing, brought to Madrid during negotiations for the sale of the Duke's collection, since there was still a chance that it might be purchased – at least in part – by Philip IV.⁸ In any event, Zurbarán is known to have been influenced by Reni's style through originals and copies of his work in Spain.⁹ Significantly, the 1794 inventory of the Buen Retiro palace attributes the Hercules cycle to the school of Giovanni Lanfranco (1582–1647), who worked with Reni on several occasions, and it has also been linked to Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652)¹⁰ – whose style was also influenced by Reni – and more specifically to his *Tityus* and *Ixion*, which in 1634 were also acquired for the new palace.¹¹

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- 1 Wouk 2018, 335–39.
- 2 Ibid., 709, note 54.
- 3 Ibid., no. H.67-76.
- 4 Soria 1955, 14.
- 5 Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. 535.
- 6 Japón 2020b, 182.
- 7 Birke 1988b, 417.
- 8 Elliott 2002, 556.
- 9 Pérez Sánchez 1993, 108; Japón 2020b, 181.
- 10 Soria 1955, 14; Angulo Íñiguez 1964, 80.
- 11 Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, P-1113 and P-1114.