Monstrosity as Spectacle: the Two Inseparable Brothers' European Tour of the 1630s and 1640s

Karen Jillings

Abstract

This article analyses the historical phenomenon of human exhibition by focusing on the celebrated case of the Italian gentleman Lazarus Colloredo, who during the 1630s and 1640s successfully toured Europe exploiting the multi-faceted interest generated by the parasitic twin protruding from his sternum. This article draws on performance theory as well as the latest research on the exhibition of so-called human monstrosities both in the seventeenth century and during the Victorian era, in order to explain the differing audience responses to this form of entertainment. For modern scholars the apparent attraction of human exhibition throughout history invites investigation into notions of performance and spectacle at different times, and the ways in which prevailing cultural forces shaped spectators’ interpretations of such acts. Seventeenth-century audiences regarded Lazarus and his brother as awe-inspiring works of God and wonders of nature, whereas for those who visited British and American freak shows during their heyday in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the fascination with human oddities had become overwhelmingly medicalised. Such performances offer instructive comparisons as well as notable contrasts with the early modern spectacle of monstrosity.

Full Text:
PDF

Active in Paris during the 1630s and 1640s, the brothers are today best known for their startlingly realistic depictions of the poor. Painters of altarpieces, portraits and allegories, the brothers’ work was rediscovered in the 19th century by such art historians as Champfleury, and influenced many artists including Gustave Courbet and Édouard Manet. The brothers then became famous as “painters of reality,” admired for their deeply sympathetic and affecting portrayals of hard-working men and women. In these paintings, we see smiling field laborers, city beggars with deadpan expressions, mother The first two-thirds of the 17th century in Italy were dominated by the Roman Baroque, and few painters elsewhere provided serious competition. Reni, who returned to Bologna from Rome in 1614 and remained there until his death in 1642, remained the strongest artistic personality in that northern city but steadily abandoned the strong plasticity of the Carracci for a much looser style with a pale tonality. Naples, under its Spanish viceroys, remained strongly influenced by the “Caravaggesque” tradition, particularly in its best-known painter, a Spaniard,
José de Ribera, who settled there in 1616; the two most important native painters of the period, Massimo Stanzione and Bernardo Cavallino, both died in the disastrous plague of 1654. Lazarus went on tour with his brother in order to earn a living, even traveling to England to make an appearance at the court of King Charles I in the early 1640s. When not on exhibition, Lazarus would shield his brother from public view by covering him with a cloak. While little documentation exists on the Colloredo brothers, their popularity throughout Europe was neither unique nor unexpected, considering their exceptional physical condition. Image One: A 17th century sketch of the Colloredo brothers, Lazarus and Joannes Baptista. Image Two: Charles Stratton traveled to England with P.T. Barnum in 1844 under the stage name, General Tom Thumb. Image Three: Julia Pastrana toured Europe as either the Ape Woman or the Bearded Lady.