

LIVING GODS WILL

Biblical Artists

BARTOLOME



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Born: 1617 – Seville, Spain

Died: 1682 – Seville, Spain

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Born in Seville on December 31st, 1617—towards the end of the Spanish Golden Age—**Murillo** grew up in a cosmopolitan city feasting on the riches of Spain's vast colonial empire.

By the time he was old enough to hold a paintbrush, the Andalusian capital had already produced two epoch-defining artists: the refined portraitist Diego Velázquez and the sternly religious Francisco de Zurbarán.

Murillo's early paintings were heavily influenced by Zurbarán's chiaroscuro style, featuring illuminated countenances of saints and angels against dark, dramatic backgrounds.

As a devout Catholic with close associations to Seville's religious orders, the fledgling artist quickly became known for his spiritual canvases. Yet **Murillo** was no one-trick pony.

Unlike his Spanish contemporaries, he ventured beyond religious themes to paint Sevillian street life. His touching (if idealized) depictions of street urchins, beggars, and flower girls were likely commissioned by itinerant Flemish merchants who frequented the city.

While the gritty subject matter might have been familiar to viewers in the Protestant Dutch Republic, it was boldly revolutionary in Catholic Spain.

Although **Murillo's** early work was generally pious and somber in tone, his later paintings embraced a broader color palette. Earnest, life-like figures were bathed in a soft, smoky light; cherubic angels dissolved into fluffy celestial clouds.

The metamorphosis was likely the result of a visit to Madrid, where the artist would have met **Velázquez** and been exposed to eclectic canvases in the royal collection, including work by Flemish masters **Peter Paul Rubens and Anthony van Dyck**.

By the time of his death in 1682, Murillo had produced more than 400 paintings and cemented a legacy that would endure for some 200 years—making his paintings a magnet for collectors, top museums, and art thieves.

"Murillo is one of the most important painters in 17th-century Spain, an artist who was consistently interested in establishing a contact between the surface of a painting and the viewer," explains Xavier F. Salomon, chief curator of the Frick Collection.

Above all, **Murillo** is remembered for his religious paintings, particularly his renditions of the Immaculate Conception, a cornerstone of Catholic doctrine that obsessed many Spanish Baroque painters.

Murillo attempted over two dozen Immaculates in his career. One of the most famous is **La Inmaculada Concepción de los Venerables (1678)**, a jubilant painting of the Virgin Mary that today hangs in the Museo Nacional del Prado.

The work is also known as **La Inmaculada de Soult**, after Jean-de-Dieu Soult, the Napoleonic general who stole it from Seville's Hospital de los Venerables in 1810. After Soult's death in 1851, the work was sold to the Louvre for a reputed 615,000 francs—a world-record price for the time.

Another **Murillo** that went missing was **The Vision of Saint Anthony (1656)**, which eschewed the contrasts of chiaroscuro in favor of a more light-handed, vaporous style.

Hung in Seville's cathedral, the painting was the victim of a notorious art heist in 1874 when an unknown thief cut the figure of Saint Anthony out of the canvas. The fragment turned up in New York several months later, whereupon it was quickly sent back to Spain and re-inserted into the painting. The seams are still visible today.

Murillo was, in many ways, a victim of changing tastes. **"He was incredibly famous up until the 19th century,"** says Salomon, **"but with shifting fashion for art—and because of many of the subject matters he treated—he has been less popular, undeservedly, in the past century."**

Zealous Catholic iconography fell out of fashion in the late 19th century, when Spain's crumbling empire lost ground to more secular-minded influences in England and the United States.

As the artist's reputation began to falter, even his documentary paintings became objects of derision. Rather than sweet and emotive, **Murillo's** depictions of beggars and paupers were dismissed as unrealistic and saccharine.

Romantic masters such as **Francisco de Goya** had rewritten the rules for edgy documentary art, while a new breed of modernists, led by **Édouard Manet** and later **Pablo Picasso**, preferred the vivid portraiture of **Velázquez** to the wispiness of **Murillo**.

A reevaluation of **Murillo's** subtle genius is long overdue. Alongside the artist's masterworks, modern critics have begun to reassess his less-heralded skills as a draughtsman and portraitist.

This renaissance has been aided by the discovery of several **"lost"** works, including a striking portrait of the historian Don Diego Ortiz de Zúñiga found in a Welsh castle in November 2017.

Quickly snapped up by the Frick, the painting was recently displayed at the New York museum alongside a duo of rare self-portraits in **"Murillo: The Self-Portraits."** (The show will continue on to London's National Gallery later this month.)

It's the first time that the two self-portraits have been shown together since 1709.

"It is a unique opportunity to see them reunited," Salomon, who co-curated the exhibition, notes.

Meanwhile, the **"Año Murillo"** in Seville—a public celebration of the artist's quadricentennial organized by the city's government—has reunited other notable **Murillo** paintings from across the world.

The various sections of an altarpiece commissioned by a local Capuchin convent, scattered during the Napoleonic conquests of the 19th century, have been reassembled for a show at the city's Museo de Bellas Artes.

"Murillo and His Trail in Seville" at the Espacio Santa Clara studies his far-reaching influence on other painters, while the local cathedral has unveiled an exploration of his religious work.

After centuries stuck in the doldrums, **Murillo's** legacy is now poised to rejoin that of the Spanish greats.

Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables

oil on canvas (274 × 190 cm) – 1678

The Virgin Mary appears dressed in a white robe with a blue mantle, her hands crossed over her chest, with a crescent moon at her feet, and eyes upraised towards Heaven. The Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables stands out due to its triumphant tone.

This effect is achieved through Murillo's use of light which creates a sense of movement from the bottom right to the top left of the painting. This upward movement, and the symbolism associated with the clouds and angels surrounding the principal figure, create a visual reference to the Assumption, connecting Mary's purity with her status as Christ's mother.

Joseph and the Potiphars Wife

oil on canvas (197 × 254 cm)

1640 – 1645

The subject of this painting, taken from the Old Testament was very popular in seventeenth-century painting. Sold into slavery in Egypt, Joseph served in the house of Potiphar, the captain of Pharaoh's guard. Potiphar's wife made eyes at him, but he resisted her attempts at seduction.

On one occasion, when she tried to entice him to bed, Joseph escaped and she was left with only his coat. Disappointed by yet another rejection, she told her husband that Joseph had made advances to her, whereupon the angry Potiphar had Joseph thrown into prison.

With arms outstretched, Joseph flees from the half-naked woman on the bed, who only succeeds in getting hold of his yellow cloak.

The Baptism of Christ



oil on canvas (233 × 160 cm)

1655

Jesus is kneeling in the river while Saint John, standing, baptizes him. Murillo's main contribution will be the spirituality that emanates from the attitudes of the two protagonists, collected in their faces. The composition is organized through a baroque diagonal which links both characters, diagonal that is repeated between the back of Saint John and the dove of the Holy Spirit, on the top of the canvas.

The scene takes place outdoors, a wooded landscape appearing behind the Jordan, although it is the cloudy sky the protagonist of the background. The same clear and diaphanous light that bathes the entire group in his companion, fleeing the gloom of previous years.

The Holy Family



oil on canvas (240 × 190 cm)

1655 - 1670

The Virgin Mary gazes tenderly at the infant Jesus standing on her knees as she presents him for the adoration of Saint John the Baptist and his mother, Saint Elisabeth. Jesus clutches the cross of reeds the young Saint John the Baptist is offering him. This cross and the lamb in the foreground announce the Passion that Christ will later endure.

Above the infant Jesus is the dove of the Holy Spirit and, further up in the parting clouds, God the Father surrounded by cherubs holds out his open arms to the earthly group below. The evocation of the Holy Trinity gives this family scene its solemnity. The subject of Jesus' meeting with his cousin John fascinated Renaissance artists.

Christ Healing the Paralytic

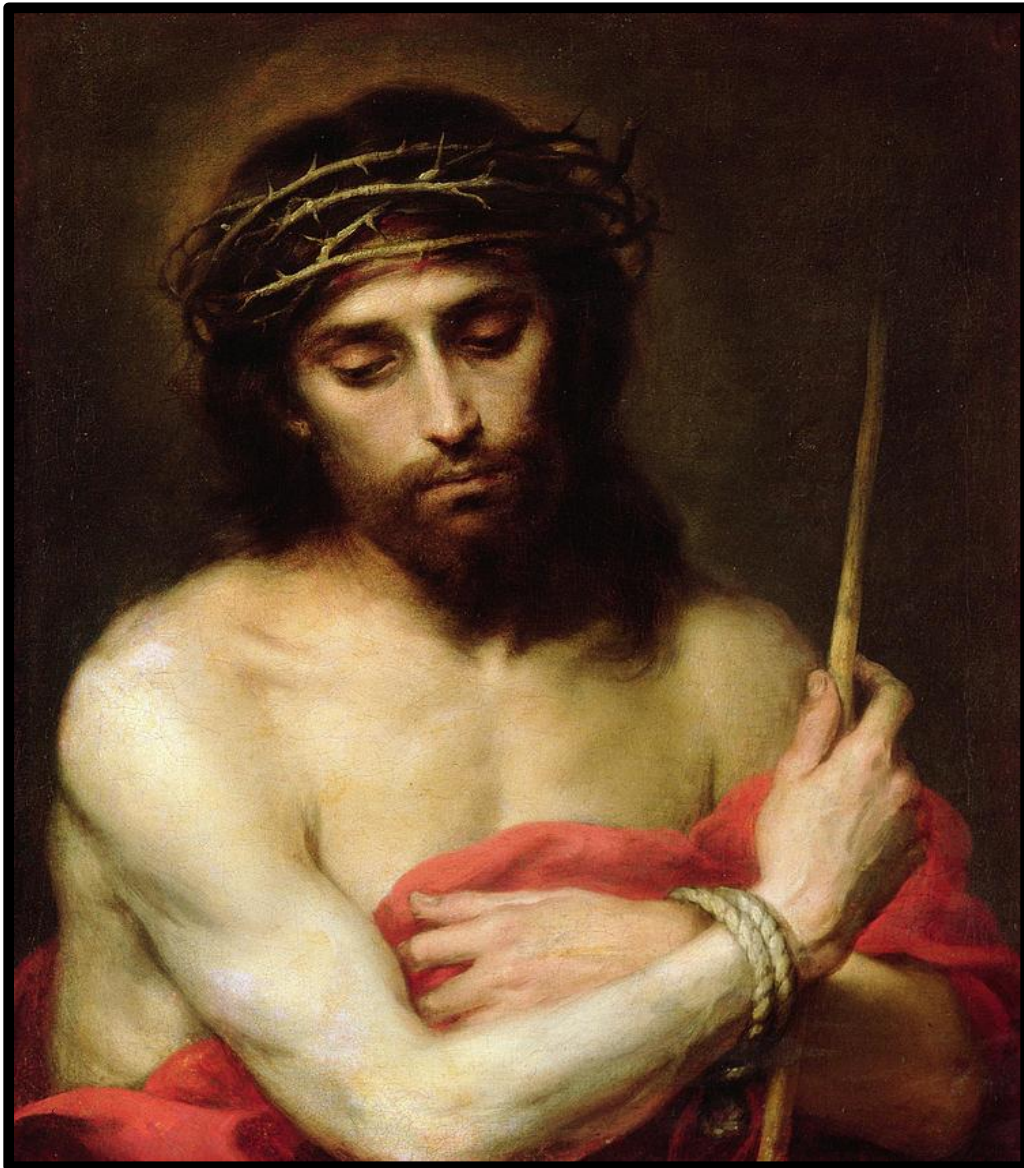
oil on canvas (237 × 261 cm)

1667 - 1670

The pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem was periodically visited by an angel, and whoever first stepped into the water after this visit would be cured of illness.

Christ visited the pool and a sick man complained to him that he was never able to get to the pool first.

When Christ said to him, 'Rise, take up thy bed, and walk', the man was miraculously cured. The painting was made for the church belonging to the hospital of the Caridad (Charity) in Seville.

Christ the Man of Sorrow / Ecce Homo

oil on canvas (237 × 261 cm)

1660 - 1670

The Ecce Homo is an image devoid of narrative context and yet rich in meaning. Taken from Saint John's account of The Passion in his Gospel, the words of the title 'Behold the Man!' are those of Pontius Pilate, spoken after Christ had been scourged and mocked.

Christ wears the emblems of kingship with which He is scorned – the crown of thorns, a red cloak and the reed scepter. In painting Christ's downcast gaze Murillo captures not only His humiliation but also a sense of quiet reflection and patient endurance. In this depiction of introspection, the artist succeeds with admirable understatement in conveying Christ's resignation to His fate.

Return of the Prodigal Son

oil on canvas (236 × 262 cm)

1667 - 1670

The 'Return' shows the Prodigal Son being embraced by his father. The mother stands behind the father, which may refer to Jesus and his mother. Because the parable of the Prodigal Son is all about forgiveness by God. The parable of the Prodigal Son has also been associated with the days of Jesus' passion between his doubts in the garden of Gethsemane and his resurrection. Jesus was in this dramatic period the lost Son of God, who only at the resurrection seemed again to return to the favors of his father.

The brother of the young man does not agree with the father taking his other son in again. But Luke tells that the father answers to his angry son as follows: "My son you are with me always and all I have is yours. But it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come to life; he was lost and is found".

The Adoration of the Shepherds



oil on canvas (187 × 228 cm)

1650 - 1655

Mary presents the Christ Child to a group of adoring shepherds.

A lamb looks upon the scene from the right and a cow from the left.

The Heavenly and Earthly Trinities

oil on canvas (293 × 207 cm)

1680 - 1681

In the last stage of his life Murillo makes one of his best images of the Holy Family, also called The Two Trinities since the figure of the Child Jesus is located in the center of the composition, forming the heavenly Trinity with the Eternal Father and the Dove of the Holy Spirit who are upon Him while at the same time establishing the earthly Trinity with Mary and Joseph.

These characters appear kneeling in an attitude to show their son who stands on a pedestal. The Eternal Father opens his arms to welcome the Child and the dove descends to Earth to settle on Him. A court of angels surrounds the heavenly Trinity.

John the Baptist in the Wilderness



oil on canvas (61 × 69 cm)

1660 - 1670

Saint John is shown at center from his torso to his head and he is looking up to the sky with his body turned slightly to the left and his hand over his heart.

He is holding a long pole with ribbons on the end at right.

He is dressed in camel hair.

He is wearing a dark sleeveless shirt and has a dark beard and mustache.

His dark hair reaches to his shoulders.