



SPANISH MASTERPIECES

A trail exploring some outstanding works by
Spanish artists in the National Gallery's collection

The National Gallery's collection of Spanish paintings is renowned as one of the finest in the world outside of Spain, although the number of paintings it contains (54) is relatively small. Beginning with just one Spanish painting at the Gallery's foundation in 1824, the Gallery now offers the best place, other than Madrid, to study the work of Velázquez, and contains masterpieces from Spain's greatest painters, including Murillo, Zurbarán, El Greco and Goya. The majority of the collection represents the 'Golden Age of Spain', the great flourishing of the arts from about 1575 to 1700. Most of these paintings were acquired in Britain, almost half of them presented or bequeathed by individuals, testimony to the British public's affection for Spanish painting.

THE
NATIONAL
GALLERY

SPANISH MASTERPIECES



We'll start our trail with one of the earliest Spanish paintings in the collection, in Room 63.



Saint Michael Triumphs over the Devil

Bartolomé Bermejo, 1468

This painting is a brilliant display of Netherlandish style transformed by Spanish exuberance of design and imagination. Bermejo has used the Netherlandish technique of oil painting to achieve the glistening light playing across Michael's crystal shield and armour (reflecting the Gothic towers of the heavenly Jerusalem) as he raises his sword to slay the strange, ruby-eyed hybrid creature that is Satan. This was once the centre panel of an altarpiece in the church of San Miguel in Tous, near Valencia, now under water after the construction of a reservoir there. During the period this was painted, the Archangel Michael was associated with the re-conquest of Spain from the Moors, having been established as the warrior and protector of the 'chosen people' in Hebrew scripture. Bermejo has signed his painting on the parchment below the donor (the man who commissioned this painting). It reads 'Bartolomeus Reubus', a Latin form of his nickname Bermejo, which means red.

Moving along to Room 14 you'll find another Spanish painter who earned himself a special nickname.



The Virgin and Child

Luis de Morales, probably 1565–70

Morales became known as ‘El Divino’ (The Divine) because of the religious nature of his work. He painted several versions of the Virgin and Child that were very popular as devotional images. Although working in western Spain, Morales responded to recommendations from the Council of Trent (present day Italy) to revitalise Catholicism by making religion more personally relevant. Local bishops advocated emotional involvement in personal devotion and Morales’s paintings were created to achieve this. His tender and intimate study of mother and child entirely absorbed in each other provides ideal visual focus for meditation by depicting them up close, and against a dark background, to encourage a sense of intimacy.

Travelling on to Room 30, here you will encounter some of the most memorable images of the Spanish Golden Age.



The Toilet of Venus (‘The Rokeby Venus’)

Diego Velázquez, 1647–51

This is the only surviving painting of a female nude by Velázquez, better known for his paintings of the Spanish court under Philip IV (whose portrait by Velázquez also hangs in this room). For a nude to have been painted in 17th-century Spain, where public morals were closely controlled by the Inquisition, is very unusual. It suggests that this was painted for someone close to the king and

it would have been displayed only privately. The depiction of the goddess of love, the embodiment of ideal beauty, has a long tradition in art and the pose here is similar to several nudes by Titian (Tiziano). Velázquez cleverly combines two traditional motifs: Venus reclining and Venus before a mirror. The mirror held by Cupid shows Venus looking back at our intrusive gaze. Is the blurred image perhaps a metaphor of art’s inability to capture ultimate beauty?



Saint Francis in Meditation

Francisco de Zurbarán, 1639

Zurbarán is exceptional for his powerful and realistic interpretations of monastic life, combining stark realism with mystical intensity. Saint Francis, the founder of the Franciscan religious order, was adopted as an icon of the Counter-Reformation. The saint’s personal relationship with God is emphasised here by his eyes, intently focused heavenwards as he meditates on death, symbolised by the skull, in the fading light. The stigmata, the marks of the wounds Christ received at his Crucifixion, can be seen here on the saint’s left hand. Saint Francis received them after a vision he had while praying on the mountain at La Verna and they are the easiest way of recognising Francis in most paintings of him.

Self Portrait

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, probably 1670–3



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In Murillo's time, one of the principle purposes of art was preserving the memory of the dead. The Latin inscription in this painting explains that Murillo is 'portraying himself to fulfil the wishes and prayers of his children', but he has also preserved his self-image as a painter for many more generations to come. Sadly, he outlived six of his nine children, and died as a result of a fall from scaffolding while at work on a painting. Murillo is playing with us here by depicting himself as a framed painting that has come to life. By placing his fingers outside the frame, Murillo ruins the illusion of an oval painting within a painting, but adds to the realistic effect of the portrait. He asks us to believe that this is the artist himself above the ledge upon which his palette rests.

Finally let's take the time to look at one last portrait, one of the finest in the Gallery, in Room 39.



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Don Andrés del Peral

Francisco de Goya, before 1798

This painting was made six years after Goya became deaf. Peral, a specialist in lacquer painting and gilding, was one of Goya's colleagues at court and would have known him well. Goya claimed to have three teachers: Rembrandt, Velázquez and nature. Velázquez's influence is most evident here, particularly in the deft brushwork around the collar and in his amazing ability to convey a sense of living presence. Like the sitters in many of Velázquez's works. Don Andrés is shown against a simple dark background, focusing our attention on the subject and heightening the sense of reality through lifelike lighting effects on his skin. His gaze outwards conveys his intelligence, but Goya has not flattered his sitter, whose drooping mouth may represent a grimace or the result of a stroke.

If you would like to find out more about the National Gallery's collection of Spanish paintings, a new book, *El Greco to Goya: Spanish Painting*, is available now from Gallery bookshops. Or you can visit our website at www.nationalgallery.org.uk.

Please note that a painting may occasionally be off display. If so, you can view a reproduction of it on Artstart screens around the Gallery.