

Spanish Painting in the Seventeenth Century

In the 1500s, Spain had been enriched by treasure from the Americas, and the next century saw the Golden Age of Spanish painting. Most of the painters who made this such an outstanding period are represented in this room.

Juan van der Hamen was the son of a Flemish aristocrat at the court in Madrid. Because of its holdings in the Low Countries, Spain had close political—and artistic—contact with the North. Van der Hamen, widely regarded as one of the greatest still-life painters of the seventeenth century, was known for detailed and convincing depictions of everyday objects. Still life had only begun to be considered as an independent subject in the late 1500s, when it appeared in the North, Italy, and Spain more or less simultaneously.

At the age of twenty-five **Jusepe de Ribera** settled in Naples, which was under the control of the Spanish crown. Since his paintings often returned to Spain—even though he did not—Ribera exerted a strong influence on other Spanish artists and helped introduce them to new developments in Italian painting. Responding to Counter Reformation calls for works that involved the emotions of the faithful, his images of saints convey both physical reality and the mysticism of religious experience.

Even after Madrid became the center of the Spanish court, Seville remained the country's most important economic center. During the 1620s and 1630s, its many religious foundations kept **Francisco de Zurbarán** and his large workshop busy with commissions. After about 1640, however, Zurbarán's style—sober and restrained—lost favor to the softer look and more emotional appeal of younger artists, and he began to produce a large number of paintings for export to the New World.

Bartolomé Murillo succeeded Zurbarán as Seville's leading artist. His subjects are engaging, animated by his flair for narrative. And his seemingly effortless style—though in fact he designed his compositions with great care and remained a diligent student of painting technique—gives them appealing immediacy.

Diego de Velázquez devoted most of his career to strikingly innovative portraits of the Spanish monarchy and royal court. At the age of twenty-four he became painter to Philip IV, and served the king as portraitist and courtier until his death. The shorthand of Velázquez's brushwork mimics the effect of light and color with extraordinary realism. His free and fluid style, a legacy of the Venetian renaissance, in turn, influenced Manet and the first masters of modern art.



Juan van der Hamen y León

Spanish, 1596–1631

Still Life with Sweets and Pottery, 1627

Long considered one of van der Hamen's best works, this still life is one of the artist's earliest experiments with multilevel arrangements. Three plinths of varying heights add interest and complexity to the composition. Repetition of shapes, especially circles, unites the disparate elements on these ledges. The pattern established by the red, open-centered earthenware jug is reinforced by the rims of other vessels, the circular wooden marzipan boxes, and even the doughnut-shaped confections. The textures of these sweets, pastries dusted with sugar and figs glistening with a sugary glaze, contrast with the angular and hard stone surfaces. They are the foods Madrid's upper classes enjoyed on *honradas ocasiones*.

Van der Hamen's virtuoso ability to mimic nature is evident in his treatment of the small, water-filled glass bowl, which not only casts a shadow but also refracts the light passing through it. The poet Lope de Vega, who was a member of the same educated circle as the painter, wrote two sonnets in praise of van der Hamen's work, suggesting in one that nature herself should copy his fruits and flowers.

Oil on canvas, .842 x 1.128 m (33 1/8 x 44 3/8 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1961.9.75



Jusepe de Ribera

Spanish, 1591–1652

The Martyrdom of Saint Bartholomew, 1634

Saint Bartholomew, who was flayed alive, was a subject Ribera treated several times. Here the painter focuses not so much on the physical anguish of the saint as on his mystical experience. The unusual X-shaped composition pulls the viewer into the scene to share the profound emotion that passes in the moment when Bartholomew confronts his executioner with eyes lifted to God. Attention is drawn also to the sharpening of the knife; the position of the blade and whetstone forms a cross—involving us not only in Bartholomew's martyrdom but also in Christ's sacrifice and crucifixion.

Ribera's thick, rich paints communicate a real physical presence. He uses the coarse bristles of his brush to texture the paint and give it tactile dimension. White hairs in the saint's beard are created by silvery filaments of paint. Around his eye, the pigments wrinkle like old skin.

Before settling in Naples, Ribera had spent some time in Rome studying the works of Caravaggio. Evident in this picture is the influence of Caravaggio's dramatic lighting, deep shadows, and unremitting realism, but the intensity of Ribera's religious fervor and his skillful handling of paint are his own.

Oil on canvas, 1.04 x 1.13 m (41 x 44 1/2 in.)
Gift of the 50th Anniversary Gift Committee 1990.137.1



Francisco de Zurbarán Márquez

Spanish, 1598–1664

Saint Lucy, about 1625–1630

It is not a treat—fruit or small cakes—that Lucy proffers on a small serving tray, but her own eyes. According to her legend, which developed centuries after her death in 304, the young virgin had plucked them from their sockets because their beauty had tormented a young man. He was so impressed by the strength of her faith that he immediately converted to Christianity. Lucy's eyes were miraculously restored to her one day as she said her prayers, but she suffered martyrdom for her faith nonetheless. Lucy was betrayed to the pagan authorities, who ordered her to a brothel. She could not be moved, however, so they set her on fire, but she remained untouched by the flames. Finally she was pierced through the neck with a sword.

Zurbarán gives Lucy an imposing monumentality, not simply by making her figure large and close to the front plane of the picture, but also by simplifying the background behind her. Against its darkness, she stands out—compelling our attention with the brilliant colors in her costume and flower-laden wreath and through the penetrating realism of Zurbarán's disciplined painting style.

Oil on canvas, 1.05 x .770 m (41 3/8 x 30 1/4 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1943.7.11



Francisco de Zurbarán Márquez and workshop
Saint Jerome with Saint Paula and Saint Eustochium, about 1640/1650

In seventeenth-century Spain, the religious orders were unrivaled in their patronage of the arts. Among the most important were the Hieronymites, whose white and brown habits are worn by these three saints: Paula, her daughter Eustochium, and Sophronius Eusebius Hieronymous, called Jerome in English. Under Jerome's spiritual direction, the two women founded a hospice and convent in the Holy Land that were regarded as the initial establishments of the Hieronymite Order. Paula and Jerome hold books, alluding to Jerome's role as the translator of the Bible into Latin. Paula, a well-educated woman from an illustrious Roman family, assisted Jerome with translations from Greek. Although Jerome is traditionally shown in a cardinal's garb, this is ahistorical. He died around 420, but the office of cardinal was not created until the end of the eleventh century, and the red robe and hat were not adopted until the mid-1200s.

This work relies on a formula Zurbarán used for a series of pictures he painted in the late 1630s for the Hieronymite monastery of Guadalupe. There is extensive reworking in the contours of the figures—probably an indication that while Zurbarán established the composition, the actual painting was carried out by assistants. Paula's robe, for example, appears doughy and lacks volume as it falls to the floor. Her stony expression and awkward thumb also suggest the hand of an assistant.

Oil on canvas, 2.457 x 1.735 m (96 3/4 in. x 68 1/4 in.)
Samuel H. Kress Collection 1952.5.88



Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez
Spanish, 1599–1660
The Needlewoman, about 1640/1650

For thirty-eight years Velázquez was primarily occupied with portraits of the royal family and its entourage, but he did paint other subjects, such as this one, apparently for his own pleasure. Dutch pictures of women involved in their needlework celebrated industriousness and virtue, but there is no indication of Velázquez' intention here. Perhaps the woman was a member of his household, but that, too, cannot be determined.

This painting, which was in Velázquez' studio at the time of his death, remains unfinished, allowing an unusual look at his working method. He began with a warm gray-brown ground. (The pillow consists solely of this foundation layer.) Using black paint he then sketched the outlines of his design with quick strokes, which are clearly visible on the left-hand side of the picture. In some areas—the white shawl, for example—the texture of the canvas itself helps to model shadow. This is a common element of Velázquez' paintings, as are the rapid flickers of white that enliven the dress bodice. Only the woman's face is complete. There, thinly applied translucent glazes give the impression of soft light striking her face. Velázquez' fluid, painterly style was influenced by the works of Venetian artists, especially Titian. He traveled twice to Italy, but he could also see Titian's pictures in the palace in Madrid—one of Titian's most committed patrons had been the Spanish king Philip II.

Oil on canvas, .740 x .600 m (29 1/8 x 23 5/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.81



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
Spanish, 1617–1682
Two Women at a Window, about 1655/1660

This may look like an innocent scene: a young woman peering from her window as her chaperone attempts to muffle a laugh with her shawl. And it may be just that, but it is also possible that something quite different is being depicted here. The earliest title given to this painting was *Las Gallegas* (The Galician Women). As contemporary viewers would have understood, Galicia, a poor province in northwestern Spain, was the homeland of most of Seville's courtesans and prostitutes. The younger woman's direct gaze, along with her low neckline and red flower, may beckon a customer—or the viewer himself.

A tradition of Dutch moralizing pictures showed wayward young women with their procuresses. Murillo would certainly have seen such works in Spain. Many of his clients were Flemish and Dutch merchants living in Seville. Northern paintings, however, usually contained more overt indications of their subject—the procuress was an older and more sinister figure, and other clues, such as animals associated with lust, might also be included. Murillo's painting remains a puzzle.

Oil on canvas, 1.252 x 1.045 m (49 1/4 x 41 1/8 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.46



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
The Return of the Prodigal Son, 1667/1670

Murillo was a member of the Hermandad de la Caridad, a lay brotherhood devoted to acts of charity, and this large canvas was one of a series he painted for the brotherhood's church in Seville. The brotherhood's leader called them "six hieroglyphs that explain six works of charity." The story of the prodigal son, told in Luke 15:11–32, was commonly used in the seventeenth century to focus on themes of forgiveness and resurrection. A son, having squandered his wealth with sinful living, repented and returned to his father's household, not to be granted privileges but to work. Moved to compassion, his father embraced him, telling his servants, "Fetch quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his finger and shoes on his feet . . . and let us eat and make merry because this my son was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost and now is found."

The large figures in the center, father and son, command attention by their size and powerful triangular arrangement, but our eye is also drawn by bright colors—yellow, blue, and red—to the figure on the right. This servant holds the shoes and new garments, and next to him another man holds a large ring. While Murillo's emphasis on the garments is unusual, it does underscore one of the Hermandad's six acts of charity—to clothe the naked.

Oil on canvas, 2.363 x 2.62 m (93 x 102 3/4 in.)
Gift of the Avalon Foundation 1948.12.1