

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON

Spanish Art

SELECTED WORKS OF ART FROM THE TOUR



Laocoön

(pronounced: Lay-ah-kah-wan)

c. 1610/1614

by El Greco (Domenikos Theotokopoulos)

(Spanish, 1541–1614)

■ *Laocoön* illustrates an episode from the mythological stories in Virgil's *Aeneid*, an epic poem that starts with the Trojan War. For ten years, the Greeks had been at war with the Trojans, hoping to win back Helen, the wife of the king of Sparta, Menelaus. When Ulysses directed the Greeks to build a wooden horse, fill it with soldiers, and offer it as a trick gesture of defeat, Laocoön, a priest of Apollo, warned the Trojans to beware the gift. He flung his spear into the wooden side of the horse to prove it was hollow, thereby desecrating an object the Greeks had dedicated to the goddess Minerva. The gods sent serpents from the sea to strangle Laocoön and his two sons. The city in the distance is not an imaginary Troy but a view of Toledo, Spain, the seat of the Catholic archbishop, and the place in which El Greco painted this work. Some art experts think that perhaps Laocoön not only tells a powerful tale of retribution in Greek mythology, but that it may have been El Greco's way of suggesting the dangers that lay in wait for those who strayed from the path of the teachings of the Catholic Church during the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

El Greco ("The Greek"), who was born on the island of Crete in 1514, began his career as a painter of religious icons in the Byzantine tradition. Then, after working in Italy, El Greco reached Toledo, Spain, in 1577, where he received many religious commissions. His style can be recognized by elongated figures and striking contrasts of light and color.

QUESTIONS

- 1 Are El Greco's colors representational or evocative? Do they support the story?
- 2 Do facial expressions and body movements convey the emotion of the scene? Explain the effectiveness of each.
- 3 Knowing the facts of the story, what kind of lesson is the painting attempting to teach?

The Return of the Prodigal Son

1667/1670

(detail, cover)

by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo

(pronounced: Moo-ree-yo)

(Spanish 1617–1682)

■ The biblical account of the prodigal son, illustrating repentance and forgiveness, is Jesus' parable of a man and his two sons, found in Luke 15:11-32. The younger son asked for his inheritance early and traveled to another country, where he squandered his wealth. Regretting his former extravagance, the boy returned home and offered himself to his father as a servant. Murillo illustrated the climax of the story—the homecoming, just before the older brother arrived at the welcoming feast. In front of the family's majestic mansion, the father, in a gesture of forgiveness, embraces his young son, while servants bring new clothes to replace the prodigal's rags.

This work was part of a series of eight large paintings Murillo was hired to paint for the Church of the Hospital of Charity, belonging to the Brotherhood of Holy Charity, in Seville. All the subjects treated themes of healing and charity. Murillo was one of Seville's leading artists during the second half of the seventeenth century, when that city was the intellectual and artistic center of Spain. By the age of fifteen, Murillo was selling paintings in the artists' stalls of Seville's marketplace. Monasteries, churches, hospitals, and individual patrons commissioned his works.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does the artist portray forgiveness, love, and happiness? Do the colors add to the emotion of the story? Are the colors bold and vivid, or are they subdued and gentle?
- 2 Is this the part of the story you would depict if you were the artist?
- 3 Describe an experience when you did something you regretted and for which you were then forgiven. What about when you were the forgiver?

Bartolomé Sureda y Miserol

c. 1803/1804

by Francisco de Goya
(Spanish, 1746–1828)

■ This painting of Bartolomé Sureda y Miserol, a Spanish artist and industrialist, is a companion piece to a portrait of his French wife (also in the National Gallery of Art), and was most likely completed just after the couple moved to Madrid from Paris. Sureda was a student of Goya who went on to become the director of a famous porcelain factory in Spain. The three-quarter-length portrait depicts Sureda wearing the latest Parisian style of clothing and sporting the fashionable, tousled haircut. In this way, Sureda conveys his position among Spain's aristocratic elite. The white cravat with highlights of red and the blue-and-white striped waistcoat frame his face and draw the viewer's eye to meet Sureda's own reflective gaze. Sureda's pose suggests he has paused for a few moments and is lost in his own thoughts. Goya not only shows the physical likeness of the man but also suggests his urbane and self-confident spirit.

Francisco de Goya was one of Spain's greatest painters and an internationally influential printmaker during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Working for the royal court increased his popularity among Madrid's society. Goya's skill as a portraitist was widely recognized during his lifetime.

QUESTIONS

- 1 List the colors used. How does your eye move through the painting?
- 2 What does Sureda's pose convey about his personality? How would your impression of him change if he were in a different position, standing straight, or sitting in profile?
- 3 What kind of portrait would you choose to have of yourself? What pose would you choose? Full-length or bust-length? Front view or profile? What clothing would you wear? How would you suggest your interests? Where would you hang the portrait?

Family of Saltimbanques

(pronounced: saul-tim-bonk)

1905

by Pablo Picasso

(pronounced: Pea-kahs-so)

(Spanish, 1881–1973)

■ From late 1904 to the beginning of 1906, Pablo Picasso's work centered on the theme of the saltimbanque, or itinerant circus performer, a popular subject of painting and poetry throughout the nineteenth century. In 1904 Picasso moved to a section of Paris called Montmartre. Much to his delight, along with other avant-garde artists, poets, dealers, and collectors, Montmartre was also the home of the Cirque Médrano. Picasso was drawn to the entertainers, taken with their agility and pursuit of illusion. He may have identified with their nomadic existence as he thought about his own sense of isolation as an artist and a Spaniard.

This phase of Picasso's work is distinguished by the use of a rose palette and attenuated figures and is sometimes referred to as his Rose period. The *Family of Saltimbanques*, an image of the circus performers set against a desolate background, was the largest and one of the most important paintings Picasso made during this period. In this haunting composition, a tall harlequin stands on the left with his back to us; he holds the hand of a little girl who is also turned away from the viewer. Near them stands a jester and two young acrobats. In the right foreground a young woman sits with her left arm poised in an unusual position. Picasso was known to include images of himself, his family, and friends in his pictures. The face of the harlequin is most certainly a self-portrait. The woman is likely Fernande Olivier, Picasso's companion. The identity of the young girl remains a mystery.

QUESTIONS

- 1 How does Picasso's use of color create the mood of this painting?
- 2 What do peoples' glances in the painting tell you about their relationships? How does body language play a role?
- 3 Have you ever been with a group of people yet felt all alone? Has Picasso captured this emotion in his painting?

Information

TRANSPORTATION

Metro stops are Judiciary Square (red line), Navy Memorial/Archives (yellow/green line), and Smithsonian (orange/blue line).

Metered street parking is available along the Mall for cars and vans. Buses may let students off at the entrance noted on your confirmation sheet. Parking for buses is allowed on Independence Avenue next to the Washington Monument.

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