

MURILLO, SPANISH MASTER

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IN THE CAMPUS of the Catholic University, in the nation's capital, stands the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. In the crypt of this unfinished monument to Our Lady, Patroness of the United States, is a beautiful mosaic of Murillo's world famous and awe-inspiring masterpiece, *The Immaculate Conception*. The mosaic, composed of more than eight hundred thousand bits of glass of myriad shades and tints, is a triumph of art executed by the artists of the Vatican Museum. Pope Benedict XV, eager to show his appreciation to the American children of Mary, had the work started during his pontificate. In the reign of our Holy Father, Pius XI, whose recent death the whole world mourns, this marvel of Italian art was completed and sent to America.

The oft-reproduced original—a universal favorite—once was, and we earnestly pray, still is in the Prado Museum, Madrid. In times past, during destructive invasions, Spain has felt the loss of the treasures of the masters. Spaniards of the nineteenth century were forced to witness the systematic pillage and thoughtless destruction carried on by the Napoleonic underlings during the Peninsula campaign. Amidst a fortune in art, another Murillo *Immaculate Conception*, a painting now in the Louvre, Paris, was carried across the French border under orders from Marshall Soult, dubbed by critics of a later date, the “enlightened thief.” In 1852, the French government purchased the painting at a price then unheard of in the art centers of the world. Madrid mourned while Paris rejoiced. Spain, overrun by international mercenaries, may once again be deprived of the treasures entrusted to the present generation. Paris, London or New York may find themselves proud possessors of an increased number of Murillo's religious legacies.

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The life of Bartolomé Estéban Murillo reads like a novel. Poverty, struggle, fame and fortune succeed one another in a career unparalleled in Spanish art. Simplicity, purity and a thorough Catholicity characterize his life and labour. This devoted son of the Church was born at the close of the year 1617 in sunny Seville, a city full of

charm, the pride of the Spaniards of the southern province of Andalusia. The record of his baptism is preserved in the Dominican church of San Pablo. His parents, of the humbler class of Seville, worked as artisans to supply the needs of the youngster and his sister. While he was yet in his teens, God called the boy's parents during an epidemic. From this tragic hour an uncle and aunt watched over him and his sister. Noting the talent of the youth, the uncle enrolled him in the school of Juan del Castillo, foremost art teacher of Seville. The youth delighted to sketch his creations along the margins of his text books and on scraps of paper. In 1640, the master Castillo, eager for new fields, transferred the studio to Cadiz, leaving Murillo in his twenty-second year without a guide and all but penniless. Moreover, his sister, Teresa, depended on him for support. It was a rough road that he had to travel, a hard struggle to make the proverbial ends meet.

A small income was realized from his mediocre religious pictures and portraits painted on rough canvas. He found buyers for his works at the weekly fair usually held on Thursdays. Captains and traders, paying a very small sum for many of these crude creations, stored them on ships bound for the recently-converted lands of Mexico and South America, trans-Atlantic Spain, where paintings on religious themes had a special appeal for the poor and unlearned populace. Missionaries in this period as well as in our own age availed themselves of the pictorial method to spread the kingdom of Christ on earth. Art was thus brought to serve the Church and the brush of the poor artist of Andalusia was an instrument for good in the eternal design of an All-wise Providence.

Often in the market-place idle moments forced themselves upon the artist, moments that he used to advantage in diligent preparation for the future. "Murillo's eyes were busy laying up a store of information, gaining an intimate knowledge of the human types about him. To these experiences may be traced the impressions which eventually helped to infuse his devotional pictures with so remarkable a blend of naturalism."¹

An event occurred in his twenty-fourth year that was destined to effect a profound change in his mode of life and style of painting. Moya, once a schoolmate of Murillo and of late a pupil of the English favorite, Van Dyck, court painter to Charles I, appeared one day in Seville, to the delight of the local artists. In his possession were many reproductions he had made of his master's art. To Murillo, they were at once a revelation and an allurements, creating within

¹ Caffin, Charles H., *Old Spanish Masters*, (New York, 1907), p. 134.

him a desire to see something of the great work of famous artists.

A firm determination to study the paintings of the old masters occupied his every thought. But money was necessary for travel and the over-anxious youth had next to nothing. However, necessity is the mother of invention. "He purchased a quantity of saga cloth and cutting it into the most marketable sizes he primed and prepared the little squares and immediately set to work to cover them with a saleable art. Saints and Madonnas, flower pieces and landscapes, Sacred Hearts and fanciful cascades—he painted them all and disposed of his entire stock to a speculative shipowner for resale in the South American colonies. He then placed his sister under suitable protection, and without informing anybody of his plans or his destination, in 1642, he disappeared from Seville."²

With his attention turned towards England, the eager traveler first made his way on foot across the Sierras to Madrid, the capital of the Spanish art world. Velasquez, at the height of his power, favorite of the court and friend of the people, received his fellow Sevillian, encouraged his ambition and even arranged for study in the Royal Galleries. The budding artist, in a heaven beyond his dreams, used as models the works of Titian, Rubens, Van Dyck and Ribera, artists whose works had an especial appeal to his artistic temperament. With untiring zeal and boundless energy, the poor youth served a fruitful apprenticeship, all the while under the gentle guidance of Velasquez, who recognized in him the talents of a master. Progress was rapid, but a longing for distant Seville came over him. As a result, he prepared for the return journey in spite of the protests of his patron and teacher who was eager to finance his advanced studies in the Eternal City. "While others would have thirsted for the widening inspiration of Italy, he hungered to produce himself in his native city."³

It was in 1645 that Murillo joyfully retraced his steps to Seville. From that time till his death in 1682, he seldom left its borders or even his studio, so ardent was his application during these fruitful years to his labour of love. A series of paintings for the cloister of the Franciscan convent marks the beginning of his efforts for the adornment of the temples of God round about Seville. Immediately his distinctive paintings arrested the attention of the art-loving, religiously-minded Spaniards. In his attractive and forceful style, critics perceived a blending of the manners of Ribera and Van Dyck, a true

² Calvert, A. F., *Murillo*, (New York, 1907), p. 11.

³ Calvert, A. F., *op. cit.*, p. 13.

compliment to a novice. It was a style at once natural and delicate, with scope of composition and powerful coloring.

Murillo was, and in the immortality of his art is, an ideal religious painter. His works teem with illustrations of the religious virtues, especially a profound humility, joined to meekness and charity. Such virtues ruled his life and it is little wonder that they should burst forth in compositions inspired by the truths of the Catholic Faith. Secular subjects, with the notable exception of the ever popular paintings of the street urchins of Andalusia, seemed foreign to his art. Seville's churches and museums that have weathered the plundering of the past three centuries allow us an insight into the ideas and images he strove to illustrate. The galleries of Dresden, Madrid, Florence and Rome, to mention but a few, display his beautiful Madonnas. *Moses Striking the Rock* and the *Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes*, were painted for the Church of St. George, in his native town. The Prado of Madrid had amongst its treasures the attractive *Children of the Shell*, *The Education of the Virgin*, *St. Elizabeth of Hungary Tending the Sick*, and the aforementioned *Immaculate Conception*.

By his countrymen, Murillo is styled the "Painter of the Conceptions." Amongst his sacred and devotional works, this subject appears again and again. He loves to portray "The woman clothed with the sun, the moon under her feet." (Apoc. 12:1). No less than twenty Immaculate Conception paintings were conceived and executed by his genius. The exquisite loveliness of Our Lady in her blue mantle and white robe, her feet concealed by the folds of her glowing garments, bids us raise our minds to heavenly contemplation. Mary "our tainted nature's solitary boast," rises above the crescent moon, the symbol of things earthly. "It is as if an unseen hand had suddenly drawn aside an invisible curtain and we, the children of earth, were for a moment permitted to view the court of heaven itself."⁴ The purity, innocence and youthfulness of the Virgin's countenance give a glimpse of the painter himself. They reveal something of the character of an artist who said that a painter must be pure of mind and heart to portray scenes in the life of Our Lady, Queen of Artists.

In yet another composition, the youth and beauty of the Mother of Grace is delicately drawn. *The Education of the Virgin* is not as well known as it should be by our present youthful generation, for whom it carries a special message, a message of humility, simplicity and respect for authority. This masterpiece, a gem of Spanish art,

⁴ Keysor, Mrs. J. E., *Murillo*, (Boston, 1899), p. 17.

distinctively Hispanic in all its details, is one of Murillo's finest achievements. Tradition relates that the models for the mother and child of the picture were Doña Beatriz and the young Francesca, wife and daughter of the artist. In Murillo's work, we see the Virgin on the balcony of the temple attentively listening to the instructions of St. Anne. Heaven and earth meet in beautiful symbolism as angels descend from above to lay a crown upon the fair head of the maiden clothed in trailing court robes. "This crown or wreath which the artist has introduced is the Virgin's particular attribute as the Queen of Heaven and is also emblematic of superior power and virtue."⁵ St. Anne has set aside her daily tasks to attend to the education of her heaven-sent child. In this work of touching charm, Murillo tells a story and teaches a lesson not without importance to our present generation.

The Catholic spirit, so evident in his art, was the guiding light of his home life. His marriage to Doña Beatriz de Cabrera of a well-to-do family of Pilas was a happy and blessed one. Of that union three children were born, two boys and the girl Francesca mentioned above. For a time one of the sons followed in the footsteps of the father, but the youth laid aside the brush and the palette to raise to heaven the chalice of the Lord. The other son also became a priest. Biographers relate that the oldest, Gabriel, came to America, perhaps to the missions of Central America. It is significant that the daughter should have entered the Dominican convent of the Mother of God in Seville. How often the girl must have looked on in childish curiosity as her father painted scenes from the life of the Child Jesus and His Virgin Mother!

Murillo, like Raphael, loved to paint children, the Christ Child and St. John the Baptist being his favorites. *Children of the Shell* reveals the youthful Christ in the act of supplying His cousin, John, with the waters of life. It is symbolic of Christ's communication of love and strength to the herald who was to go before His face to make straight the path. The subjects used for these immortal pictures, known and loved by young and old, clearly reveal their Spanish origin. In his *St. John the Baptist* we see one of the poor lads of Seville taken from the background of his everyday life and through sheer genius made to serve this spiritual theme.

In a whole series of paintings, amongst which we might mention *Boys Eating Melons*, *Boys Throwing Dice*, and *Three Ragged Boys*, Murillo depicts the street-urchins and beggar-boys that he knew. One thoroughly appreciates his keen observation of the life about

⁵ Caffin, C. H., *op. cit.*, p. 147.

him and his love for the little ones playing around the studio door or in the byways of the town. His *Beggar Boy*, in the Louvre, crouching on a stone floor between a picture and a basket of fruit, arouses sympathy for the boy and a feeling of admiration for the artist who thus idealizes the homely simplicity of youth.

In our own land one can glimpse some of his masterpieces. The Metropolitan Museum in New York City has his painting, *St. John on Patmos*. The Hispanic Society of America is the proud possessor of two canvasses, one of which reveals his talents as a portrait-artist. In a private collection in Philadelphia rests the artist's *Gallegas at the Window*.

Murillo's last work found him still in the service of the Church. While busily engaged in painting the *Marriage of St. Catherine* for the high altar of the Church of the Capuchin Fathers in Cadiz, a fall from a scaffold terminated his brilliant career. The injured artist was brought home to Seville, where for two long years he lived the life of an invalid. He who had devoted his life and talents to the beautification of the House of God and the convents of His servants now found in one of them a harbor of peace in time of storm. "During the long days of his painful illness Murillo had himself carried into his parish church of Santa Cruz. Here he would spend hours in prayer, before Pedro Campana's painting of the *Descent from the Cross*. This was his favorite picture, and it is related that when asked one day why he gazed upon it so long and so expectantly, he replied, 'I am waiting till those men have brought down the body of Our Blessed Lord from the Cross.'⁶ He died in April, 1682, and at his own request was buried at the foot of this painting which had been the subject of long meditations in his hour of trial.

A great artist and a fervent son of the Church had passed to his reward, but not without having first left his fellow-members of the Mystical Body devotional paintings with a universal appeal. "Like Rembrandt he understood that the true language of the Gospel was the language of the people. Like him, he especially delighted in the merciful and tender aspects of the Gospel."⁷ Murillo had always striven to bring the stories of the Old and New Testament down into touch with human experiences and this trait accounts, in large measure, for his world-wide, perennial popularity.

Painting which has been styled "the quasi-daughter of preaching," was a very definite vocation for Murillo who, with a palette instead of a pulpit, apostolically carried on the doctrinal tradition of

⁶ Calvert, A. F., *op. cit.*, p. 103.

⁷ Gillet, Louis, "Murillo," in *Catholic Encyclopedia*, II, p. 465.

the Church. There was an apostolic earnestness about his work that compelled interest. A critic of Spanish art observes, "Throughout an active career he kept everyone interested and in love with his work by his gift of a language intelligible to all times and peoples, to all classes and even to those not of his Faith."⁸ Nor did the eloquence of his work die with him. His conceptions which so profoundly influenced the people of his day have lost none of their primitive charm. It may be that his paintings are less noticed, not because they have lost their fervor, but because the observers have lost their faith. It is to be hoped that his sermons on canvas may help to bring a generation notorious for materialism back to the things of heaven, so to attest to the truth of the observation, "It might be said of the two great Spanish Masters that Velasquez is the painter of earth and Murillo of heaven."⁹

⁸ Caffin, C. H., *op. cit.*, p. 148.

⁹ Viardot, Louis, *Wonders of European Art*, (New York, 1874), p. 36.