

EXHIBITION

Revealing two sides of Murillo



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Spanish painter’s hard-knock street scenes contrast with his images of sentimental saintliness

The lively scenes of everyday people and places from 17th-century Seville, Spain, that populate “Murillo: From Heaven to Earth,” at the Kimbell Art Museum in time for its 50th anniversary, are memorable as much for their masterful brushwork as for the incidents and subjects that they depict.

Gathering 50 paintings and drawings from across the United States and Europe, the show offers a counterpoint to Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s reputation as a sweetly sentimental religious painter, best known for his influential version of the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary.

Although art lovers at large might have had Murillo pegged as a specialist in heavenly scenes, visitors to the Kimbell have long known his genre work in the form of *Four Figures on a Step*, a street scene whose several roguish characters are anchored by a mature lady frowning dubiously at her viewers from behind a pince-nez with chic round lenses and thick frames. *Four Figures* has been at the Kimbell since 1984 and served as the inspiration for the current exhibition.

In fact, “From Heaven to Earth” reveals that for Murillo, the secular and religious aspects of life are essentially continuous, not starkly opposed. In a secular genre scene such as *Two Boys Playing Dice*, the slightly disreputable amusement is laden with great moral weight, as each throw of the dice risks the fate of the lad’s immortal soul.

Conversely, in a religious scene such as *The Marriage Feast at Cana*, a stunner that closes out the show, a viewer can enjoy the worldly goods on view — the intricate Asian tablecloth, an elegant gilt ewer, the lovely local Sevillian pottery and the scrumptious meat pies on the table — as much as the story of Christ miraculously changing water into wine.

Similarly, the scene of the then-recently sainted Thomas of Villanueva grandly giving out his clothes to a cluster of grateful beggar boys is equally secular and religious. It’s a moment of street life in its own right, as much as a defining element of Thomas’ saintly legend.

Even leaving aside the nuances of Murillo’s thematic approach, viewers can appreciate the artist’s mastery of the paintbrush, especially when it comes to tricky areas such as the sleeves and ribbons in the portraits, the soft skin of the sitters’ faces, the pettable fur of the many charming dogs and the transitions from detailed foreground to atmospheric background.

Murillo had the all-around talent to cover a full range of material. His work boasts both the luscious texture of a Rubens and the solid geometrical structure of a Poussin, bridging the famous divide between those two masters.

While the lives of the individual Sevillian notables depicted in the gallery devoted to Murillo’s portraiture may not be unduly fascinating on a biographical level, Murillo’s handling of such details as their leather gloves, lace collars and sword hilts is still worth a good look.

Also, the small but outstanding gallery of landscapes features a gorgeously restored *Jacob Laying Peeled Rods Before the Flocks of Laban*, on loan from the Meadows Museum at Southern Methodist University. It will absorb viewers deeply into its sublime natural world, regardless of its puzzlingly obscure biblical subject.

Murillo’s hometown of Seville, where he spent his career, gave him plenty of material to work with. An economic center of the Spanish empire, Seville was home to many merchants from northern Europe who were ready customers for Murillo’s genre paintings, a type then still novel and unfamiliar to the Spanish public.

Meanwhile, the devastation of a plague in 1649, followed by a famine in 1651, inspired an outpouring of charitable work among religious confraternities (of which Murillo himself was a member) for whom serving the poor was not just a moral obligation, but a sacred duty. This is the fervor that animates a work such as *San Diego de*



The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo’s *The Marriage Feast at Cana* is an oil-on-canvas painting from circa 1672 that’s part of the “Murillo: From Heaven to Earth” exhibition now on view at the Kimbell Art Museum.



Kimbell Art Museum

Four Figures on a Step (1655) has been at the museum since 1984 and served as the inspiration for the show.

Details

“Murillo: From Heaven to Earth” continues through Jan. 29 at the Kimbell Art Museum, 3333 Camp Bowie Blvd., Fort Worth. Open Tuesday through Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday from noon to 8 p.m. and Sunday from noon to 5 p.m. \$18 for adults, \$16 for students and seniors 60+, \$14 for children 6-11, free for members and children under 6. Half price on Tuesdays and on Fridays after 5 p.m. 817-332-8451, kimbellart.org.

Alcala and the Poor, in which several people are standing hungrily around a pot of stew, over which the saint benevolently prays.

When Murillo fills his paintings with street children and sex workers, desperate and willing to do anything for food and a place to stay, he renders scenes that would have been quite familiar to Sevillians of the time. The moral intensity of these encounters with want and poverty may also be familiar to those aware of the homeless camps or sex trafficking in Dallas. As the painted figures in *Three Boys* or *Two Women at a Window* look evenly out at the viewer, the implicit question can be plainly heard: What are *you* going to do about it?

The rise and fall of Murillo’s reputation reflects changing morals and values. He was the first internationally renowned Spanish painter; within a few years of his death in 1682, his work was already collected and admired from Munich to London. In 1779, King Charles III, determined to keep Murillo’s works in Spain, instituted an export ban, while in 1852, the artist’s *The Immaculate Conception of Soult* sold to the Louvre for a record-setting 615,300 gold francs.

As Murillo’s fame endured through the Victorian era, essayist William Hazlitt called his work a “triumph,” while novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote that Murillo was “the noblest and purest painter that ever lived, and his *Good Shepherd* the loveliest picture I have ever seen.” But by the end of the 19th century, Murillo’s work had fallen out of favor, in comparison with the starker and grittier work of his countrymen Diego Velázquez and El Greco.

While “From Heaven to Earth” may not be able to overcome contemporary audiences’ aversion to sentimental saintliness, it can at least convince viewers of the excellence of Murillo’s eye, hand and mind, as well as of the Kimbell’s commitment to great historical work.

The last large-scale Murillo show in America was done by the 30-year-old Kimbell in 2002, and the new one is a fitting choice for another major anniversary.

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