

OBJECT of the **month**

June 2021

BEGIN TRANSCRIPT

Hello, I'm Janet, a Museum Guide at the Dayton Art Institute, and I'd like to share with you a piece that the museum acquired in the year 2003. It's an impressively large painting by the Spaniard Bartolomé Estéban Murillo, and it depicts an important doctrine of Roman Catholicism: The Immaculate Conception.



Murillo, one of the premier painters of Spanish Baroque art, lived from 1617 to 1682. The Baroque era, named for its distinctive style, evolved near the end of the high Renaissance. It was the age of Rembrandt, Vermeer, and Caravaggio. Baroque style painting is characterized by high drama as well as high contrasts of tone and color. Do you think this painting fits that description?

Its title, *The Immaculate Conception*, is a doctrine that often needs clarification because this is not about the miracle of Christ's virgin birth. Rather, here is the Church's insistence that Mary herself, in order to be worthy, must also have been born free from sin.

While Martin Luther was busy in Germany posting his 95 objections to Catholicism, few countries were more devoted to the Church and the Virgin than Spain. You may recall from history that Spain had a very famous Inquisition.

To make things even more interesting, the king, Phillip IV, believed in veneration of the icon—a so-called “true image”. That is to say, if the details of a painting such as this one were faithful to all available witnesses' accounts, then such a “true” image could be revered and worshipped.

Let's explore this *Immaculate Conception* and the “truth” of its imagery. Murillo always painted this subject based on the recorded description of Saint Beatriz de Silva to whom the Virgin appeared dressed in a white gown with a blue cloak. Check.

Spain's official “Art Censor to the Inquisition” insisted Mary be shown as a young woman with her hands folded on her breast or clasped in prayer. Check. And, standing on a crescent moon—did you see that slim crescent at her feet as the moon?

Image: Bartolomé Estéban Murillo (Spanish, 1618–1682), *The Immaculate Conception*, 1670–1680, oil on canvas. Museum purchase with funds provided by Mr. Robert Badenhop, the Anne E. Charch Fund, the William Henry Zwiesler Educational Trust Fund, the Honorable Jefferson Patterson, Mr. and Mrs. Elton F. MacDonald, Mr. and Mrs. W. A. Siebenthaler, an anonymous donor in memory of Mr. and Mrs. James A. Chew, Mr. and Mrs. L. E. Simonds, Mr. and Mrs. T. W. Chesterton, Dr. and Mrs. Janusz S. Przemieniecki, and Dr. and Mrs. Marvin Schermer by exchange, 2003.5

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The Book of Revelations describes her as “cloaked with the sun” and having an angel at her feet holding a palm frond, a reference to her son's sacrifice, with other angels holding lilies, symbolic of her purity. With all those elements in this painting, Spain would have accepted such a work as literally inhabited by the Virgin herself.

This grand painting, intended as an altarpiece, is a superb display of Murillo's mature style: a simplified composition, emphasizing a sense of tranquility and contemplation. The angels are subtly represented so our focus remains on the Virgin herself—spectacular against the golden glow. We notice her upturned gaze encouraging us to likewise lend our eyes to heaven. There's great mastery in the way her gown and cloak gently drape, shimmer, and catch the breeze. The piece is fluidly and confidently painted, showing not only Murillo's technical genius but his brilliant sense of color as well.

The Dayton Art Institute considers itself lucky to have this masterpiece of Spanish art within its walls. If you would like to enjoy its splendor in-person, you can find it in our Kresge Foundation Gallery of 16th and 17th Century European Art, Gallery 218. Thanks for joining me!

END TRANSCRIPT

Click [here](#) to access the video presentation.

ARTWORKS FEATURED IN VIDEO*

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (Spanish, 1618–1682), *Self-Portrait*, about 1670, oil on canvas. The National Gallery, London. Bought, 1953, NG6153

Rembrandt van Rijn (Dutch, 1606–1669), *Portrait of Rembrandt*, 1650, oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington. Widener Collection, 1942.9.70

Johannes Vermeer (Dutch, 1632–1675), *The Milkmaid*, about 1657–1658, oil on canvas. Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. Purchased 1908 with the support of the Vereniging Rembrandt, SK-A-2344

Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Spanish, 1571–1610), *The Crucifixion of Saint Peter*, 1601, oil on canvas. Santa Maria del Popolo, Rome.

Ferdinand Pauwels (Belgian, 1830 – 1904), *Luther Hammers his 95 Theses to the Door*, 1872, oil on canvas. Eisenach, Wartburg-Stiftung

Pedro Berruguete (Spanish, 1445 – 1503), *Saint Dominic Presiding over an Auto-da-fe*, 1493–1499, oil on panel. Museo Del Prado, Madrid, P000618

Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (Spanish, 1599–1660), *King Philip IV of Spain*, 1644, oil on canvas. The Frick Collection, New York. Henry Clay Frick Bequest, 1911.1.123

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (Spanish, 1618–1682), *The Immaculate Conception of El Escorial*, about 1660–1665, oil on canvas. Museo Del Prado, Madrid, P000972

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (Spanish, 1618–1682), *The Immaculate Conception of Los Venerables*, about 1660–1665, oil on canvas. Museo Del Prado, Madrid, P002809

CONTENT CREDITS*

www.nationalgallery.org

www.nga.gov

www.rijksmuseum.nl

www.museodelprado.es

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