

# The Art of Friendship

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-82) was the most celebrated painter in mid-seventeenth-century Seville; Justino de Neve (1625-85) was a cultivated and dynamic churchman, a canon of Seville Cathedral. The two men established a professional relationship as artist and patron that soon blossomed into a genuine friendship and gave rise to some of Murillo's most ambitious and beautiful paintings of the 1660s and 1670s, when the artist was at the height of his powers.

Of Flemish origin, Neve was born in Seville. He was ordained in 1646 and was made a canon of Seville Cathedral in 1658. In his role as a religious leader Neve conducted great charitable works, such as the renovation of the church of Santa María la Blanca and the foundation of the Hospital of the Venerable Sacerdotes, a charitable home for retired priests. From the early 1660s he commissioned Murillo to decorate these places of worship that were so important to him. Murillo was the perfect choice having established himself as one of the leading painters in Seville. He could make profound theological notions accessible, persuasive and attractive through his naturalistic style of painting.

The works in this exhibition offer a unique opportunity to investigate the creative exchange between patron and artist. Even his most public commissions reflect Neve's beliefs, whether the cult of the Immaculate Conception or the importance of charitable works. Most significantly, Neve's patronage enabled Murillo to develop his late style into the so-called *estilo va* ('vaporous style'), a free and expressive manipulation of light and

colour for which he is so famous. As proof of their friendship Murillo painted his portrait as a gift in 1665 (on display in the adjacent room) and made Neve executor of his will in 1682.

## Murillo and Santa María la Blanca

Previously a mosque and then a synagogue, the church of Santa María La Blanca is dedicated to the miracle of the Virgin of the Snows or Sancta Maria ad Nives, a miraculous August snowfall that led to the foundation of the ancient church of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome. Reconstruction of Santa María la Blanca in Seville began under the supervision of Justino de Neve in 1662 to celebrate and establish Pope Alexander VII's defence of the doctrine of the Virgin's Immaculate Conception. The church held a special relevance to Neve due to his personal devotion to the Virgin and the fortuitous reference to the canon's surname (Nives-Neve-Snow).

The decoration of Santa María la Blanca was the chief project that Neve and Murillo embarked upon together. Murillo was commissioned to paint two large lunettes to be placed beneath the dome depicting the miraculous foundation of the original Roman church. One of these, *The Foundation of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome: The Dream of the Patrician and his Wife*, is displayed in this room. Two smaller lunettes for the side aisles illustrate two key Catholic doctrines endorsed by Neve, *The Immaculate Conception and Faith* or *The Church Triumphant*. The works are brilliantly conceived for the confined spaces; Murillo's compositional clarity ensures the narrative is legible to the congregation at a considerable distance below.

In order to evoke how Murillo's lunettes would have looked in their original location, they have been inserted into niches in the wall and are displayed at height. This visual illusion enables us to

appreciate fully Murillo's ingenious ability in composition, demonstrated by the way in which his arrangements of figures echo the arch of the architecture.

## Justino de Neve's Private Collection

The inventory of Justino de Neve's collection was drawn up on 28 June 1685, shortly after his death. It lists some 160 pictures, which for a non-aristocratic collection was a considerable number. This inventory, which also lists a library of books on religion, history and poetry, stands as evidence of his wide-ranging cultural interests. Neve owned an important group of paintings by Murillo and these, together with a portrait of the painter also listed in the inventory, demonstrate his loyalty and personal commitment to the artist. The collection included *The Immaculate Conception* (on display in the next room), which was almost immediately acquired for the Hospital of the Venerables Sacerdotes, and the portrait of Don Justino de Neve, as well as a number of flower paintings and allegories, such as Dulwich Picture Gallery's own *'Spring' (?) as a Flower Girl*, which was listed as one of four seasons.

Neve's collection also included paintings on panel, stone and copper, and a quartet of miniatures, identified later as by Murillo. One of these miniatures *The Dream of Saint Joseph* [recto] and *Saint Francis of Paola in Prayer* [verso] (on display in this room) has recently been rediscovered. The collection also contained works executed on Mexican obsidian, an exotic import that attests to Seville's central position in the seventeenth century as the leading European port for all kinds of goods from the New World. Neve would have used these small-scale works as aids to meditation and prayer.

# **The Immaculate Conception of the Venerables Sacerdotes, 1660-65**

The *Immaculate Conception of the Venerables Sacerdotes* was the highest valued work in Justino de Neve's inventory of 1685. It may have hung in Neve's private oratory, and formed the centrepiece to the temporary altar erected during the festivities held to celebrate the reopening of Santa María la Blanca in 1665. After Neve's death, *The Immaculate Conception* was acquired for the Hospital de los Venerables Sacerdotes and placed in its church where it remained until it was seized by Marshal Soult for his private collection during the Peninsular War (1808-14).

The Immaculate Conception refers to the Catholic doctrine that the Virgin Mary was conceived without the stain of Original Sin. Representations of this concept were extremely popular in Spain during the seventeenth century and especially in Seville.

Murillo produced some two dozen paintings of the Immaculate Conception throughout his career. In this version he eliminates the traditional symbols of the Virgin, such as the palm tree, the closed well and the unblemished mirror, and focusses on capturing the dynamism of the Virgin's triumphal upward movement. The symbols are depicted instead on the painting's richly carved frame, which is also described in Torre Farfán's account of the altar. It is the first time that painting and frame are reunited since the painting was taken by Soult in 1810.

## **The Opening of Santa María la Blanca**

The reopening of the church of Santa María la Blanca on 5 August 1665 was marked by elaborate and splendid festivities held during the Feast of the Virgin of the Snows. The celebration was immortalised in a publication by Neve's friend, the priest and poet Fernando de la Torre Farfán (1609-77), who describes in great detail the processions, the grandiose liturgies and the poetry competitions held over the course of a week to honour the cult of the Immaculate Conception. The square outside the church was sumptuously decorated with an open-air display of paintings loaned specially for the occasion, featuring such artists as Titian, Rubens, Artemisia Gentileschi, Rembrandt, Raphael, and Ribera.

The centrepiece of the festivities was a spectacular temporary altarpiece that was erected just outside the front of the church. Most likely commissioned by Neve himself, the altar contained works by Murillo loaned from his own private collection. The *Immaculate Conception of the Venerables Sacerdotes* at the centre of the temporary altar - displayed here as the 'high altar' at the end of the 'nave' - was flanked by *The Infant Christ as the Good Shepherd*, 1660-65 (Private Collection, UK) and *The Infant Saint John the Baptist with the Lamb* (on display in adjacent room). Francisco de Herrera the Younger's (1622-85) *Allegory of the Eucharist and the Immaculate Conception*, 1655, was borrowed from the Cathedral to crown the great display.

## **Murillo and the Hospital of the Venerables Sacerdotes**

In the wake of a devastating plague in 1649 and the accompanying economic crisis, the city of Seville was marred by considerable poverty and disease. In 1676 the precarious situation of numerous poor and elderly priests, who found themselves obliged to beg in order to survive, led Justino de Neve and other leading figures in Seville to support the construction of the Hospital of the Venerables Sacerdotes. Established between 1676 and 1695, the Hospital, with its church, refectory, infirmary and priests' cells, fed and looked after homeless priests, whilst also providing lodging for travelling clergymen.

The Hospital housed four paintings by Murillo. *The Virgin and Child distributing Bread to Priests* and *The Penitent Saint Peter* were commissioned by Neve specifically for the priests' contemplation and enjoyment. Both paintings embody the function and purpose of the hospital for elderly priests, and attest to the intensity of religious sentiment associated with Murillo's oeuvre. Neve's full-length portrait was bequeathed to the Hospital in his will with the express wish that the priests offer prayers to God for his soul, and *The Immaculate Conception of the Venerables Sacerdotes* was later acquired by the Hospital from Neve's own collection. These works were dispersed during the French occupation of Seville (1808-12), and this exhibition is the first time that *The Penitent Saint Peter* has been on public display since it was taken by Marshal Soult in 1810.





# Murillo at Dulwich Picture Gallery

Dulwich Picture Gallery owns one of the most important collections of paintings by Murillo in Great Britain. Thirteen paintings by the artist formed part of the original 1811 bequest by the Gallery's founders Noël Desenfans (1744-1807) and Sir Francis Bourgeois (1753-1811), which range from religious paintings of the Virgin and Child to realistic depictions of beggar children.

Four of these paintings, *The Virgin of the Rosary*, *'Spring' (?) as a Flower Girl*, *Invitation to a Game of Argolla* and *Three Boys* are recognised today as some of Murillo's greatest compositions, while the remaining nine have since been demoted as by his workshop or imitators. This display has provided an opportunity to re-examine all thirteen works and has elicited a number of discoveries along the way.

*Invitation to a Game of Argolla* and *Three Boys* are re-displayed here after two years of cleaning and restoration, thanks to a generous grant from the Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project. The removal of layers of yellowed varnish, as well as the relining of the original canvases and some sensitive retouching, has brought back the freshness and energy Murillo invested in these pictures. X-radiographs of both paintings (on display in the next room), help us understand how Murillo developed his compositions.

## Murillo's Beggar Boys

Murillo's depictions of beggar boys have always been among the most popular subjects he painted. Although we do not know who commissioned Dulwich's two paintings, most were made for a foreign market - mainly merchants from Antwerp, Rotterdam and London. The Dulwich paintings are two of the finest examples of this genre; both were acquired by Desenfans in 1804 and much copied by artists during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Thomas Gainsborough's (1727-88) *The Cottage Girl* (on display in this room) is an example of a work that, in its touching treatment of a peasant child, was certainly inspired by Murillo, although Gainsborough exchanges Murillo's earthy realism for a more picturesque portrayal of country life.

Victorian visitors to Dulwich were fascinated by Murillo's Dickensian depiction of poverty, which Ruskin described as a 'mere delight in foulness', pointing out particularly the boys' dirty feet. The paintings were hung in a prominent place in Gallery IV on either side of the archway, resplendent in ornate gilded frames for most of the nineteenth century. The two paintings have always been considered a pair, however recent pigment analysis carried out by the National Gallery's Scientific Department has revealed that the paintings were executed on different grounds, the base layer applied to the support in preparation for the paint layer. A reddish-brown ground was used for *Invitation to a Game of Argolla* and a light grey one for *Three Boys*. This variation indicates that Murillo did not paint them in sequence but probably with at least a five to ten year interval.

# Desenfans and Bourgeois: The Taste for Murillo

In 1804 and 1813 two inventories were drawn up of Desenfans and Bourgeois' collection, listing the titles of the paintings with their attributions. On display in this room are the works the Gallery's founders considered to be by Murillo, but which modern scholarship has identified as copies or paintings executed by his workshop. To give a sense of how early visitors to the Gallery would have experienced these paintings, the dense hang in this room is inspired by the display captured in Stephanoff's *Viewing at Dulwich Picture Gallery* (on display in this room).

The 'Adopt an Old Master Scheme' has enabled the Gallery to carry out full conservation work and technical examination of five paintings that were acquired as by Murillo. While *The Infant Christ as the Good Shepherd* can now be confirmed as an eighteenth-century copy after Murillo, and *The Infant Saint John* as by one of his close followers, new information has come to light to indicate that *The Adoration of the Magi* is an autograph oil sketch for a larger altarpiece and *The Immaculate Conception of the Virgin* is likely to have been painted by Murillo and his workshop. The large painting of *Christ Carrying the Cross* which has been catalogued here as by an anonymous Sevillian painter could potentially be an example of Murillo's early work.

The Bank of America Merrill Lynch Art Conservation Project has also enabled the Gallery to produce high-quality X-radiographs of Murillo's beggar boy paintings and *'Spring' (?) as a Flower Girl*.

On display in this room these X-radiographs offer surprising revelations regarding Murillo's working methods, such as the recycling of an already-used canvas, as with *'Spring' (?) as a Flower Girl*, or adapting his compositions as he paints, a relatively rare method in Murillo's work but one which can be seen in the *Three Boys*.