

Murillo's Four Figures on a Step

By M. Therese Southgate, MD

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682),
Four Figures on a Step, c 1655-1660,
Spanish. Oil on canvas. 109.9 x 143.5
cm. Courtesy of the Kimbell Art
Museum, Fort Worth, Texas
(<http://www.kimbellart.org>).



Like those of so many others, the works of the 17th-century Spanish painter Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682) have come in and out of favor as rapidly as sun and shadow across a stormy sea. He was one of the major lights of Spain's Golden Century, a contemporary of Velazquez, Ribera, and Zurbaran. According to his biographer, the slightly younger Antonio Palomino (who was to Spanish artist biography what Vasari was to Italian artist biography), Murillo was Andalusia's favorite painter. Moreover, compared to artists outside of Spain, Palomino tells us, a painting by Murillo was more highly esteemed than one by Van Dyck or Titian. Murillo was called "the Spanish Raphael," an epithet related to the excellence of his numerous Madonna paintings. Most of his works were, in fact, of religious subjects; they were commissioned by convents, monasteries, and churches, including the cathedral in Seville, and were executed within the dictates of the Council of Trent. Murillo did, however, complete a number of smaller, more portable works for private homes; most of these, Palomino tells us, disappeared, taken out of Spain when their owners left. As a portraitist, Murillo was considered "eminent." So life-like, in fact, was a small English dog he included in the portrait of a Seville priest that real dogs barked at it and wondered "why it does not bark back," or so the story goes. Moreover, Murillo was not only an eminently skilled painter; as Palomino tells us, he also possessed "goodness and amiability, humility, and modesty...he never refused to take corrections offered by anybody. "

It was not until the 18th century, however, that the world beyond Spain discovered Murillo; connoisseurs, especially the English and the French, avidly collected his works. A century later, taste had shifted and Lord Byron, who was traveling in Spain, dismissed his work as hardly worth the trouble of the visit: "I did not think much of Murillo," he wrote to a friend. Nor did Delacroix find him especially noteworthy. Take away from artists like "Titian, Murillo, or Vandyke," he wrote in his journal for 1857, "the astonishing perfection of their imitation of living nature... [and] you find nothing...but a theme that often lacks all interest for the mind." When Delacroix does praise Murillo, it is, unfortunately, only to damn. The very excellence of Murillo's skills ruins the work, Delacroix says: "The astounding effect of relief, the harmonies of subtle gradations, the light and atmosphere, all the wonders of illusion will be lavished on this theme which seems so arid and uninteresting in the sketch."

Nor did the 20th century much change the fortunes of Murillo's reputation. His religious subjects, especially his Madonnas, were found to be too saccharine for modern taste. On the other hand, in more recent years, students and scholars have begun approaching Murillo's work with new interest, especially as it is seen in the few genre paintings that have survived. Of these the two most well known are in the United States: *Two Women at a Window* (below), which is at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC, and *Four Figures on a Step* (above), at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas. Unlike the bulk of his output, neither work has a religious theme. Various interpretations and various titles, some more euphemistic than others, have been given



to them over the centuries, but the mystery of their origin and why they were painted remains. Yet their harshness is no mystery. Murillo's subjects are the people of the street and how they survive.

Whether Murillo's renditions are literal is not known. However, not long before the presumed date of the painting, Seville had been visited by bubonic plague (one estimate says that Seville lost half her population). Three years later there was severe famine, and the year after that, a popular uprising related to the food shortage. It is anyone's guess as to how these factors played into Murillo's work. But although interpretations may vary, there is unanimity in the fact that these two works are also Murillos, in the same family as a Murillo Madonna. The skill and the art are the same: the careful modeling, the unifying light, the almost "tangible" volume of the figures; in contrast to the religious works, however, the figures aggressively confront the viewer: they scowl, taunt, mock. And while the harshness of the light emphasizes the harshness of the street life, it also dramatizes the gulf between those who can afford to buy the picture and those who are its subject because they are poor.

As far as is known, Murillo retained his goodness, amiability, humility, and modesty to the end of his life. Indeed, his humility and modesty may well have contributed to his death. In 1681, while climbing to a scaffolding to work on a commission for the church of the Capuchins in Cadiz, he fell from the ladder and, as Palomino describes it, "ruptured himself so that his intestines protruded." So great was his modesty, Palomino continues, that Murillo would not allow himself to be examined. He died several months later, his career ended, undoubtedly prematurely, at age 65.

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