A PAINTING OF THE VIRGIN AND CHILD BY MURILLO

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In October 1807 the English artist George Augustus Wallis sailed for Lisbon, commissioned to buy paintings in Spain for the dealer Buchanan. This was the moment for such an enterprise. Torn by revolution and overrun by the marauding armies of Napoleon, Spain was wide open to exploitation. Many old Spanish families, faced with the imminent danger of being robbed by the French, welcomed a chance to sell their treasures, and Wallis was amazed at the quality of the paintings he was able to secure. From Madrid he wrote enthusiastically: “Of the Spanish school we have no idea whatever in England. If they could see the two or three best Murillos of the St. Iago family, and some of the fine pictures of Velasquez, Alonzo Cano, Pereda, Zurbaran, Caregini, and del Greco, really first-rate men, whose works are quite unknown out of Spain, some estimate of the high excellence of this school might then be formed. This school is rich beyond idea, and its painters are all great colourists.” Negotiations for the Murillos mentioned in this letter were soon begun, and Wallis reported to Buchanan in September 1808: “After an immense deal of time lost and great trouble, I have got a permission for the house of St. Iago to sell their pictures of Murillo. The picture of the Virgin and Child, size of life—whole figures—in their chapel, is superior to any I have seen in England.” The transaction with the Santiago family was soon completed, and the Virgin and Child was in the first lot that Wallis forwarded to Buchanan. It is this splendid work of Murillo’s maturity that the Museum has been fortunate enough to secure for its collection of Spanish paintings.

The picture was well known in Spain: Palomino, early in the eighteenth century, wrote of it in El Museo Pictorico, “A most beautiful full length, life-size picture of the Virgin with her most holy infant Son on her lap, belongs to the Marques de Santiago and is enchanting for its sweetness and beauty”; Ponz in volume V of his Viage de España mentions “the excellent Murillos” in the Santiago collection in Madrid; and Richard Cumberland speaks of seeing the Virgin and Child there in his Anecdotes of Eminent Painters in Spain, published in 1782. The history of the painting after leaving Spain is brief. On its arrival in England late in 1809 it was promptly bought by Lord Berwick, in whose possession it remained until 1825. Buchanan may have bought it back at the Berwick sale in that year—in any case it was soon in his hands again, for in 1832 he sold it to Lord Overstone. From that time until the present the painting has passed from owner to owner by inheritance. The Museum purchased it from the Earl of Crawford, whose father had inherited it from Lord Overstone’s daughter, Lady Wantage.

The theme of the Virgin and Child was almost as popular with Murillo as that of the Immaculate Conception. His earliest known version, the Madonna of the Mercenarios, was painted while he was in his twenties. This was

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The head of Murillo’s Virgin, photographed by Charles Sheeler. Other details by Mr. Sheeler appear on the cover and the opposite page.
followed by a succession of others now familiar
the world over through constant reproduction.
The often repeated criticism that Murillo's
Virgins are for the most part merely pretty
girls or young Spanish women with their babies
cannot be denied. Some are more pleasing than
others, some are prettier, many are tiresomely
sweet, but all are convincing as real people
whom the artist must have known. This im-
pression is strengthened as, in canvas after can-
vas, we are confronted by four large eyes star-
ing out at us, the figures placed squarely before
us as though posing for their portraits. But as
Murillo made increasing use of the Virgin and
Child in holy scenes and visions, he developed
a more pictorial composition by showing the
mother turned slightly to the right with head,
amost in profile, bent toward the Child and
looking down at him instead of out at the
spectator. At once the result becomes more
satisfying.

This harmonious arrangement in the San-
tiago painting is enhanced by the simplicity
of the composition and the sobriety and digni-
ity of the Virgin's face and figure. Her calm
repose is charmingly contrasted with the lively
posture of the Child. There is vitality in every
inch of him, in his sturdy body, his rosy flesh,
his bright eyes, his crisply curling hair—it
seems even to animate the scarf which is twisted
and swirled about him. The coloring of the
painting is remarkably fine. The Virgin's gown
is a rosy crimson, her cloak, which has slipped
from her shoulders, a rich blue, dark in the
shadows but brilliant over her lap where the
light falls full upon it. A transparent brown
scarf lightly covers her hair and shoulders.
The gray-brown background, light behind the
two heads, deepens quickly into heavy shadow,
throwing the figures into bold relief and giv-
ing them a spatial setting.

Very like the Santiago Virgin in type and in
pose are those in the Fogg Museum's Holy
Family and in the Seville Museum's Saint Au-
gustine before the Madonna. In the latter we
see the same model as in our painting—the
The Virgin and Child by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1618-1682)
rather heavy face with its strong nose and full lips is strikingly similar. The Child, however, is closer in spirit and handling to the infants in the Vision of Saint Anthony in Berlin and the Vision of Saint Felix in Seville. These paintings, like ours, can be placed well along in Murillo’s career. In the Santiago Virgin and Child there is no sign of his famous vapidous manner; the figures are solidly built and have no tendency to melt into the background on close inspection. But despite their realism they are freely and largely constructed with an almost careless competence. Particularly brilliant is the fluid painting of the Virgin’s hand, as it holds the scarf about the Child, and the Child’s left hand with its barely indicated pink fingers. Such apparent simplicity, such ease, are the height of skill and reveal the artist in the ripeness of his development.

Just how late the picture can be dated, however, is something of a problem. In the widely inclusive period suggested by Mayer, 1668 to 1692, the early years are more convincing than the late. Of the comparable paintings mentioned above, two can be dated on other than stylistic grounds. The Saint Augustine was ordered about 1678 for the Augustine convent in Seville. Although the Virgin here is remarkably like ours, the painting is more broadly handled and gives an impression of a more advanced date than the Santiago picture. The Vision of Saint Felix was one of a large group which Murillo painted for the Capuchin convent. The work was commenced in 1665, interrupted, resumed in 1668, and carried on over a number of years. Considering the vast amount of work this commission involved, Murillo must have been engaged on it up to 1670 at least. Our Virgin and Child is close in style to several pictures in this group and must surely have been painted toward the end of this period or very soon afterwards.

There are remarkably few paintings by Murillo in the museums of this country, and up to 1927 the Metropolitan Museum owned none at all. The splendid Don Andres de Andrade, bought in that year, admirably represents the artist’s work in the field of portraiture. But the lack of a religious composition continued to be keenly felt. It is a great satisfaction, therefore, to be able now to show Murillo in his most familiar and best-loved aspect, a still greater to have him represented by a painting of such dignity and beauty. When the Museum’s masterpieces come back from their wartime exile the gallery devoted to the Spanish school will be much enhanced by two excellent new paintings—the Portrait of Cardinal Gaspar de Borja by Velazquez and the Virgin and Child by Murillo.