GUEST WORK ⌞ ⌝ OBRA CONVIDADA

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THE GOOD SHEPHERD

BARTOLOMÉ ESTEBAN MURILLO

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Born in Seville in 1617, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo started his apprenticeship in Juan del Castillo's workshop, taking his first large commission in 1645. Reaching the peak of his skills in around 1655-60, he travelled to Madrid, where he met Velázquez and the great European masters represented in royal collections. He was one of the founders of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de Sevilla. Celebrated for his *Imaculadas* (Immaculate Conceptions) and *Jovens Mendigos* (Young Beggars), his name would become synonymous with a naturalism characterised by both intimacy and transcendency, revealing a world transfigured by sensitivity, but with a recognisable familiarity in common gestures and objects. Seen as one of the greatest artists of the Golden Age of Spanish painting, his works achieved extraordinary popularity, not only amongst his contemporaries but also among ensuing groups of artists, leaving his mark on painting, sculpture and collecting for centuries to come. But the sensibility of his most iconic images was devalued, betrayed by their exhaustive repetition in devotional copies, illustrated postcards or even commemorative stamps. Emptied of the subtlety in it's composition, colouring and lighting of fabrics and skintones, they ended up losing most of their emotional efficiency – one of its greatest achievements.

Naturalism in the depiction of the sacred was not a novelty devised by Murillo alone, and the "sweetening" of religious scenes was not rooted in a sudden fondness for loving imagery either. In a city devastated by hunger and plague where bourgeois mercantile communities, ecclesiastic elites and mendicant orders crossed paths, another spiritual belief gradually grew. And another sensibility, in contrast to the tenebrism or the dramatics of some Counter-Reformation artworks, was inspired by the new expressions of Italian and Flemish painting which circulated through copies and prints. In Murillo's Seville, mysticism — so dear to Spanish religiosity — was not exclusively found in the surges of ecstasy, in the asceticism of penance, or in the visualisation of the suffering of Christ

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (Sevilla, 1617-1682)
The Good Shepherd
c. 1660
Oil on canvas
123 × 101,7 cm
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P000962

Provenance: Royal Collection (acquired by Cardinal Gaspar de Molina y Oviedo, Seville; acquired by Elizabeth of Farnese, Madrid, 1744; Elizabeth of Farnese Collection, La Granja de San Ildefonso, Segovia, 1746, nr. 831; La Granja, 1766, nr. 831; Palacio de Aranjuez, Madrid, 1794, nr. 831; Palacio Real, Madrid, 1814-1818, nr. 831).

and the *Mater Dolorosas*. In art, like literature, the intimate encounter with the divine was caused by "the love of god" too, in contemplation of *dulcedo dei* ("the sweet divine") and in the empathic, almost loving, communion with images of the sacred turned human by beauty. And no expression of *dulcedo dei* had greater success than the moments of Jesus' childhood: between Mary and Joseph, playing with Saint John the Baptist or, in a meaningful emotional paradox, sleeping innocently near the cross.

As a skilled interpreter of images and an artist of admirable technique, Murillo knew how to depict this new spirituality. His representations of the Good Shepherd are proof of his ingenuity: through the innocence of childhood, he reinterpreted and reworked the traditional iconography of the adult versions, adapting it to his era without changing its core. The painting from the Museo del Prado is one of the most brilliant versions of this, with its combination of bucolic lyricism and a pious message. Perhaps that is why it was a success with a vast public with different sensibilities.

Fig. 1 — Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *The Infant Saint John the Baptist*, c. 1670. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

"Fitting perfectly" within the scenery, the Good Shepherd rests upon a rock, his staff on his lap and a hand tenderly placed on one of the sheep, while a flock grazes calmly in the distance. In a soft and luminous palette, the naturalism of the Child's juvenile features and his poor clothing is also depicted carefully in the portrayal of the animal that keeps him company, and the fragments of the ruins invoke a bucolic and nostalgic view popularised by poetry of Virgilian inspiration. But this arcadian vision of pastoral innocence hides other meanings. More than simple testimonies to a past, the ruins are traditional symbols of a pagan world defeated by Christianity, highlighting the doctrinal character of the painting. And it was through a narrative and formal summary that Murillo was able to give the Child the two facets of Christ as the Good Shepherd, according to the words of the Gospels: He is the one that rescues stray sheep (Luke 15: 3-7) and the one that protects and guides his herd, giving his life to save them if necessary (John 10: 1-17). Facing this child who stares at us with a determined and serious gaze that is a little unnatural for his age, it is impossible not to think of another pious image with strong emotional weight: Christ identified with the sacrificial lamb. The same one that Murillo imbued with sweet dramatism in his representations of the Infant Saint John the Baptist accompanied by the "lamb of God." The two images complemented each other, as real pair or simply invoked in the mind of the observer.

Proof of this can be seen in the artificial enlargement of this canvas after its arrival in the Royal Spanish collections, so that it could be made into a set with a *San Juanito*. The two "Holy Children" were exhibited as such in the first Sala Murillo (Murillo Room) in the Museo del Prado, and they still stand toghether in the Museum, letting the 21st-century observer, whether religious or merely an art-lover, witness a transcendency made earthly by the painter's brush.

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Translation (PT-EN): Lara Santos, trainee