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Observer

Resurrecting Murillo: Before the putti got to him, Bartolome Esteban Murillo could paint a mean scene

Biederman, Christine. *Dallas Observer*. Dallas: Mar 14, 2002. Vol. 993, Iss. 1

Abstract (Summary)
Looking at it all, it's easy to understand why [Bartolome Esteban Murillo] fell out of favor with the first stirrings of Modernism in the mid-to-late 19th century. Whereas Zurbarán's overwrought, surreal hyperrealism appealed to Modernist schools, Murillo's loosely brushed, romanticized, mature style today seems impossibly antique. Murillo is the exact point where the appealing bizarreness of the baroque, with its dusty skulls and alizarin crimson blood and guts, gives way to the effeminate, the meringue, the rococo. He was to the Spanish late baroque what Renoir was to Impressionism: an accomplished painter whose artistic vision was too often marred by sweet, pedestrian platitudes. It is no wonder that in the 20th century Murillo's images are more often appropriated for religious tchotchkes and chocolate boxes than for promoting museum shows. Then, too, as one of the marvelous essays in the show's catalog points out, "a Murillo was not always a Murillo." As the favorite painter of the Spanish counter-reformation, Murillo had many followers, imitators and blatant forgers. Charles III banned exportation of Murillo's works, a law that seems to have had little effect on the trade but did spawn a veritable cottage industry in copies and fakes. The problem was compounded by the fact that, as the scholar Claire Barry notes, "few of [Murillo's] works are signed or dated, and some details of his early life and travels remain a matter of conjecture." Barry's own essay goes some way toward remedying this problem, examining Murillo's **painting techniques** in X-ray detail. And yet, Murillo has been so long ignored by scholars and collectors alike that the Meadows Museum's longtime director William Jordan can confidently predict "the almost certain discovery" of new Murillos in the near future.

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Full Text (974 words)
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The Kimbell Art Museum's new Murillo exhibition is the kind of show the Kimbell does best: the meat-and-potatoes old masters monograph. This time, the Kimbell has set out to resuscitate a rep that has spent the better part of 150 years in decline, marshaling its own resources and borrowing from other small museums (mainly, [Southern Methodist University's Meadows Museum](#)) and applying the elbow grease of serious-yet-readable scholarship. The result is *Bartolome Esteban Murillo: 1617-1682 Paintings From American Collections*, a show that really shines, and that does what a museum ought to do: gives the public an opportunity to sample the oeuvre of a semi-obscure old master, to learn something while actually making a contribution to the art-historical enterprise.

Not that the show will be to everybody's liking, for Bartolomé Esteban Murillo is the Pernod of the art world: obscure, potent, popular in times long past and definitely an acquired taste. A thoroughly Spanish painter of the 17th century, Spain's Golden Age of painting, Murillo is mannered and doctrinaire, full of affectations, penitent Magdalenes and chubby Holy Children. Born in 1617 in Seville, Murillo lived and worked in that provincial Spanish seaport for virtually his entire 65 years and died from injuries sustained when he fell from a scaffold while painting yet another devotional scene for a religious order. As far as anyone knows, he never ventured farther afield than Madrid. And yet, in between turning out flights of biblical fancy and spiritual propaganda, he produced some of the most arresting portraits and street scenes to be found in the 17th century.

This has always been the paradox of Murillo, a painter of near-schizophrenic output, a magpie who aped the disparate influences that came his way, and who, in his very best works, turned these stylish bits of form into his own, emotionally available, intense, even haunting visual language. And the genius of the Kimbell's show is that it allows us to glimpse the complete artist. This we see, at the beginning of the show, Murillo the follower of Zurbarán and Caravaggio, the painter of meek, with 5 select

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