

Masters of Spanish Art (Who Aren't Picasso, Dalí or Gaudí)

By Kathy McShane

During our recent trip to Spain, I had the privilege of seeing first hand some of the masterpieces of Spanish art, some by artists I was already familiar with and some by artists who were new to me. This recent experience inspired me to share with you a little bit about a few of the Spanish masters. Having written about Pablo Picasso, Salvador Dalí, and Antoni Gaudí in earlier posts¹, I chose to exclude them in favor of artists I have not previously written about.

Doménikos Theotokópoulos (1541-1614) is better known as **El Greco**. He was born in Greece, where he achieved master artist status. He moved to Venice, Rome, and then ultimately to Toledo, Spain, partly because his opinionated criticisms of the Italian masters (e.g., Michelangelo, Raphael) had caused him to lose favor there. He had even offered to repaint the Sistine Chapel!

Now considered the architect of the Spanish Renaissance, El Greco's work fell into relative obscurity after his death. Rediscovered in the 19th century, the artist significantly influenced painters such as Manet, Picasso, Cézanne, and Pollock. Some art historians refer to El Greco as a precursor of Expressionism and Cubism. Indeed, El Greco's work, although often reflecting religious themes that characterized much of the work of the artist's generation, seems particularly modern. One critic observed, "Without El Greco, Picasso's early Blue and Rose periods are hard to imagine."

¹ Salvador Dalí in Brief, May 2, 2023, Antoni Gaudí in Barcelona, January 19, 2021, Pablo Picasso, A Virtual Road Trip, September 20, 2020. See the [Art Connection](#) on VAC's website, Dataw.art, for these and other posts about art and artists.

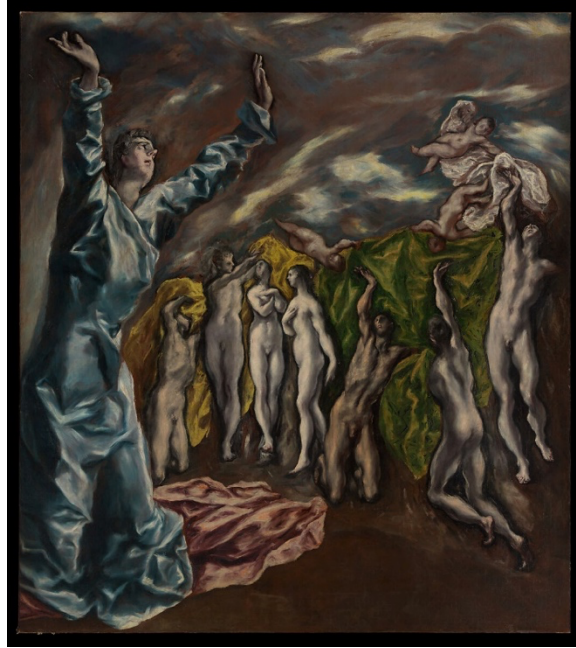
One of **El Greco's** best-known works is his monumental *Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (1586-1588), which measures nearly 16 X 12 feet. Located in the Iglesia de San Tomé in Toledo, the painting depicts the legend of Don Gonzalo Ruíz, upon whose death, Saints Stephen and Augustine came from heaven to bury him in recognition of his charitable works.



The painting below, *View of Toledo* (c. 1600), is one of the first landscape paintings in Western art, one of only two surviving landscapes by El Greco, and one of the most renowned depictions of the sky.



El Greco's *The Vision of St. John* (1609-1614) is a fragment from a large altarpiece commissioned for the Hospital of Saint John the Baptist church in Toledo. It depicts a passage in the Bible, Revelation (6:9-11), describing the opening of the Fifth Seal at the end of time and the distribution of white robes to "those who had been slain for the work of God and for the witness they had borne." Picasso used it as an inspiration for *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. K. G.)* (1911-1912), reproduced below for comparison.



Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) was the leading artist in the court of King Philip IV of Spain and Portugal. Many of his paintings are portraits of the royal family, including more than 30 of King Philip.

Early in his career, Velázquez often painted in the *bodegón* genre, *bodegón* being Spanish for "still life," with paintings typically containing everyday objects of daily life. One of Velázquez's most well-known paintings of this genre is *The Waterseller of Seville* (c. 1619-1622), shown below.



Between 1647 and 1651, Velázquez painted what would be his only surviving nude. Known familiarly as *The Rokeby Venus* (proper name, *Toilet of Venus*), the painting may have survived the Spanish Inquisition (which frowned upon paintings of nudes) because a close associate of Philip IV had commissioned it. The painting also survived a 1914 slashing in the National Gallery in London, where suffragette Mary Richardson took a meat chopper to it. Richardson stated that she tried to destroy the "picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs. Pankhurst, who is the most beautiful character in modern history." (Pankhurst was a militant U.K. suffragette, named in 1999 by *Time* as one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th century.)



Las Meninas (1656), or *Ladies in Waiting*, is considered one of the most important paintings in Western Art history. Depicting life at the court of Philip IV, the painting broke with the tradition of stiff royal portraits. The ladies in waiting surround the Infanta Margarita, daughter of Philip IV, and Mariana of Austria, who are reflected in the mirror behind the entourage. The male figure on the left in the painting is Velázquez himself.



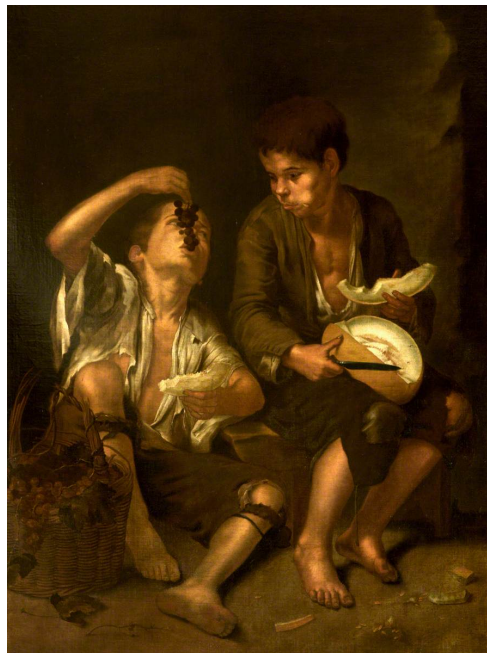
Velázquez's work influenced several modern painters, including Picasso, Dali, and the Anglo-Irish artist, Francis Bacon, each of whom reinterpreted some of Velázquez's work. In 1957, Picasso created a series of 58 reinterpretations of *Las Meninas*, one of which is reproduced below.



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), a Baroque artist, was known in Sevilla as the greatest religious painter of his age. Although many of his works are sacred, he also painted "genre" scenes depicting women and poor young children during their daily tasks, reflecting a city ravaged by the Great Plague and the ensuing economic decline. Murillo met an untimely end; he died after falling from a scaffold while working on a fresco at the Capuchin church in Cádiz. Below are several of Murillo's paintings of children and women.



Bartolomé Murillo, *The Young Beggar*, 1645, The Louvre, Paris, France



Bartolomé Murillo, *Two Children Eating a Melon and Grapes*, c. 1650, Alte Pinakothek, Munich, Germany



Bartolomé Murillo, *Two Women at a Window*, c. 1655-1660, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC

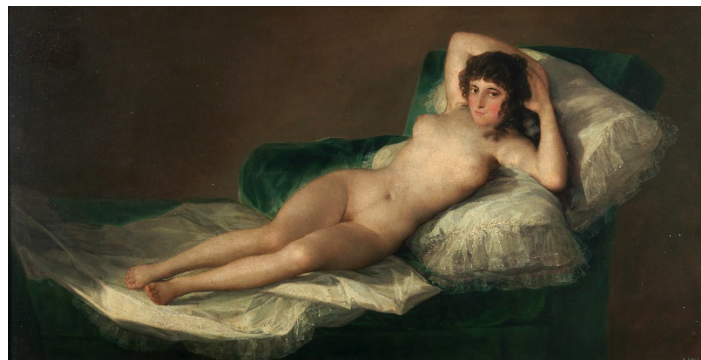
Francisco de Goya (1746-1828) is considered the most important Spanish artist of the late 18th and early 19th centuries, often referred to as the last Old Master and the father of Modern Art. Of the Romantic School of artists, Goya frequently portrayed current events; he is considered to be an exemplary war artist. In particular, some of his paintings and etchings depict the horrors of War. Reproduced below is Goya's *Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 3rd May 1808*, created during the Peninsular War, in which Spain defeated Napoleon's invading army.

Further, Goya is known for having painted one of the first "profane" (i.e., not related to myth or allegory) nudes in Western art history. *The Nude Maja*, shown below, was painted for a Spanish nobleman. That painting, and *The Clothed Maja*, were seized by the Spanish Inquisition. Today, they hang side by side in the Prado Museum in Madrid.

Late in his life, profoundly deaf from an earlier life-threatening illness, embittered toward humanity, and perhaps fearing insanity, Goya painted a series of 14 paintings directly onto the walls of his home. Called Black Paintings, these works abound with dark and disturbing images. When they were initially stripped from the walls and transferred to canvas where the public could see them, one Victorian critic referred to them as emanations from a hideous inferno. One of the most famous, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, is shown below.



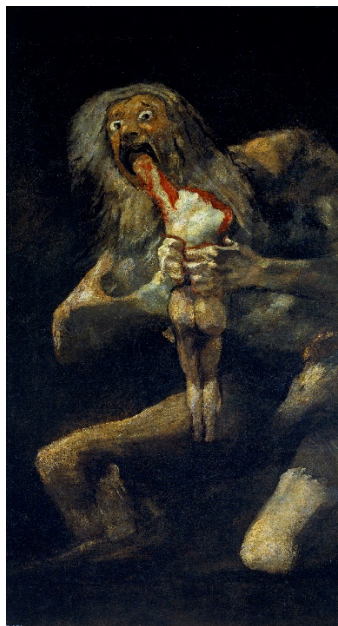
Francisco de Goya, *Execution of the Defenders of Madrid, 3rd May 1808*, 1814, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Francisco de Goya, *The Naked Maja*, c. 1797-1800, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Francisco de Goya, *The Clothed Maja*, c. 1800-1807, Museo del Prado, Madrid



Francisco de Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, c. 1819-1823, Museo Del Prado, Madrid

Marià Fortuny (1838-1874) was born in Catalunya, an artist of the Romantic School, and was much influenced by Orientalist themes. He has been called the most internationally celebrated Spanish artist of the 19th century. Sent as the official artist to the Spanish-Moroccan War, he thereafter painted many scenes from Morocco, two of which are reproduced below. Fortuny only lived to be 36; he died from malaria contracted in Naples while painting *en plein air*. His last painting, *Beach at Portici*, was painted there. His son, Mariano (1871-1949), was an influential textile artist-designer whose gowns can be viewed at the Costume Institute of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Marià Fortuny, *The Odalisque*, 1861, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona



Marià Fortuny, *African Chief*, 1870, Art Institute of Chicago



Marià Fortuny, *Beach at Portici*, 1874, Meadows Museum, SMU, Dallas, TX

Joaquin Sorolla (1863-1923) was Spain's premier Impressionist artist. While not known outside Spain as well as some of his contemporaries, he is considered a national hero in his native country. His two great loves were his wife, his muse and the subject of many of his paintings, and his home city of Valencia. Called a "Master of Light," he endlessly painted beach scenes, deftly capturing the effects of the Mediterranean sunlight. The artist often painted in plein air, as evidenced by the sand grains frequently found in his canvases. The second painting below features his wife, Clothilde (with their daughter, Maria), and the beach.

In 1912, Sorolla was commissioned by the Hispanic Society of America to paint a series of works for their library. The result comprises 14 canvases, some as large as a movie screen, depicting the regional costumes and customs of the provinces of Spain. (The Historic Society of America is in Upper Manhattan, NYC).² The fourth painting shown below is from this series (called *Vision of Spain*), featuring workers from his home province of Valencia and the renowned Valencian oranges.

As this year marks the 100th anniversary of his death, Madrid, where he lived and worked for much of his adult life, is paying homage to the artist through various special exhibits and programs.



Joaquin Sorolla, *Señora Sorolla (Clothilde García del Castillo) in Black*, 1906, Metropolitan Museum of Art

² The Hispanic Society of America was founded by the American philanthropist, Archer Huntington, known for his contributions to the field of Hispanic studies, husband of the sculptor, Anna Huntington. Both were founders of Brookgreen Gardens in Murrell's Inlet, SC, which showcases Anna's sculptures.



Joaquin Sorolla, *Women Walking on the Beach*, 1909, Museo Sorolla, Madrid



Joaquin Sorolla, *Boys on the Beach*, 1909, Museo del Prado



Joaquin Sorolla, *Valencia: Las Grupos*, 1916, Hispanic Society of America, New York City

Juan Gris (1887-1927) was, along with Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, one of the three most influential Cubist artists. Born José Victoriano González-Pérez in Madrid, the artist changed his name in 1905 and moved to France in 1906, where he lived until his death. (Gris had avoided obligatory military service in Spain and could not return to Spain). It is said that Gris was the only artist talented enough to make Picasso uncomfortable.

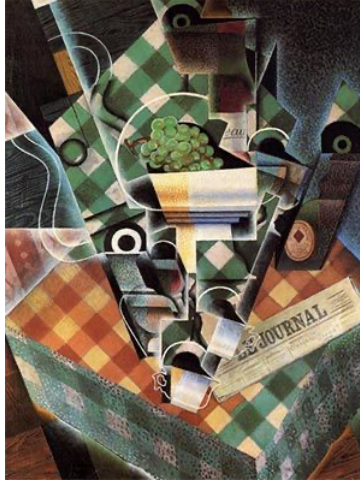
Gris' style is informed by his background as an illustrator. He was less concerned than his fellow Cubists with destroying the conventions of painting; his objective was to please the eye. During his early years in Paris, he worked as an illustrator and satirical cartoonist for various publications. The artist coined the term "Analytical Cubism," the name given to the first major phase of Cubism, characterized by monochromatic color, linear grids, and the breaking down of a subject into geometric planes. His later work moved in the direction of the second major phase of Cubism, Synthetic Cubism, in which his paintings feature the use of bold and unusual combinations of color along with collage.

The painting below is of Picasso, whom Gris greatly admired.



Juan Gris, *Portrait of Picasso*, 1912, Art Institute of Chicago

In the painting below, *Still Life with Checkered Tablecloth*, Gris incorporates everyday items, e.g., a piece of newspaper and a beer bottle logo. A close inspection of the painting reveals a hidden subject, a bull's head, an homage to his native Spain.



Juan Gris, *Still Life with Checkered Tablecloth*, 1915, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC

The Harlequin, with its checkered costume, was a favorite subject for cubists. Gris portrayed him in approximately 40 works (both paintings and sculptures) between 1917 and 1925.



Juan Gris, *Harlequin with Guitar*, 1919, Private Collection

Unfortunately, Gris died at an early age (40) from uremia. Picasso was chief mourner at his funeral. Below is one of the last works finished by Gris before his death.



Juan Gris, *Knife*, 1926, Philadelphia Museum of Art

Joan Miró (1893-1983) was a Barcelona-born painter, sculptor, and ceramicist. His body of work spans multiple schools, including Surrealism, Fauvism, and Expressionism. Unlike many foreign artists who settled in France and became French citizens, Miró remained attached to his Catalan homeland. Indeed some of his work demonstrates his Catalan pride.

Miró's first masterpiece was *The Farm* (1922). Combining realism with abstraction, *The Farm* represents, in Miró's own words, a resume of his entire life in the country.



Harlequin's Carnival (1925) was created after Miró moved to Paris and became involved with the Surrealists. André Breton, spokesperson for the Surrealists, called Miró "the most Surrealist of us all." *Harlequin's Carnival* and Dalí's *Persistence of Memory* have become one of the most iconic images of the Surrealist movement.



The Constellations are a series of 23 paintings Miró completed from 1940-1941. The artist began the paintings in Normandy, where he had moved his family, fearing the outbreak of War. Miró said he found inspiration in the night, stars, and music there. He had completed 10 of the series when the Nazis began bombing Normandy. Although he feared being on a Fascist blacklist in Spain (it turned out he was not), he returned home, ultimately making his way to Mallorca, where he completed ten more. The final three were created in late 1940 after he was able to return to his Catalan homeland. According to Andre Breton, these works symbolized the triumphal 'resistance' of art and the spirit of man in the face of the menace posed by the War. The pieces were first exhibited in New York City at Miro's U.S. art dealer's gallery in 1945, although never all 23 together. Finally, in 1993, all 23 were exhibited together at a MOMA retrospective. The painting below is the 15th in the series, entitled *Toward the Rainbow*.



The medium of sculpture offered Miró an opportunity to produce three-dimensional representations of his surrealist ideas. His sculpture, *Woman and Bird* (1983), was constructed just a few months before his death. Miro's friend and collaborator, ceramicist Joan Gardy Artigas, covered the sculpture with brightly colored broken tiles. The sculpture, standing over 70 feet high, is located in Parc Joan Miró, Barcelona, welcoming tourists to the city.

