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## ‘A Collection Without Borders’ Review: A Sweeping View of Spanish Art

New York’s Hispanic Society Museum and Library puts many of its masterworks on display in this beautifully staged exhibition, including canvases by El Greco, Velázquez and Goya.

By Mary Tompkins Lewis



Installation view PHOTO: ALFONSO LOZANO

*New York*

When it reopened last summer after a prolonged period of renovation New York’s Hispanic Society Museum and Library in upper Manhattan did so without showing any of its Old Master paintings, many of which had recently returned from participating in a touring exhibition of the collection. A selection of these works—by artists such as El Greco, Diego Velázquez, and Francisco Goya—has now been placed on display, in a show titled “A Collection

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Without Borders.” Anyone who hasn’t visited since the reopening now has even more reason to do so, while for those who have, the exhibition amply repays a return visit.

**A Collection Without Borders**

*Hispanic Society Museum and Library, through March 30*

Antonio Moro’s “Portrait of a Man” (c. 1550), one of two paintings in the collection by the Netherlandish master patronized by Phillip II, highlights the essential roles of foreign-born artists and portraiture in the Spanish Golden Age. The picture is a gorgeous demonstration of Moro’s painstakingly detailed, naturalistic style, depicting a handsome, unknown subject in gleaming steel armor. It may portray, as suggested by the framed image of a comely noblewoman pictured behind him, a military figure away from a loved one or left a widower. Hanging next to the Moro, the Spanish painter Luis de Morales’s idiosyncratic “Christ Presented to the People (Ecce Homo)” of c. 1565-70, a doleful, visionary image of the suffering Christ in keeping with the stirring religious imagery of the Counter-Reformation, aptly captures the other side of the coin that defines the sweeping scope of late Renaissance painting in Spain.



*Antonio Moro's 'Portrait of a Man' (c. 1550) PHOTO: ALFONSO LOZANO*

The exhibition, beautifully staged (though sometimes glaringly illuminated) in the refurbished, terracotta Main Court, avoids a strictly chronological path, instead encouraging viewers to find equivalences and connections between old and new art, court painting and religious imagery, and Old World and New World Spanish culture. Among the recurrent strands evident here are the deep-seated spirituality and humanity that have shaped much of Hispanic art in all periods, genres and media.

Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's "The Prodigal Son Among the Swine" (dated here c. 1660), a large, emotional painting set in a luminous, atmospheric landscape and depicting the shabbily dressed biblical figure as he begs forgiveness for his dissolute past, is a resonant image of penitence and Christian piety that would have struck a chord in the artist's native Seville. Wracked by plague, rebellion and the decimation of its beleaguered population, the once-glorious port city's late-17th-century inhabitants sought refuge, even hope, in such images that held out the promise of redemption.

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*Luisa Roldán's 'Ecstasy of St. Mary Magdalen' (c. 1690) PHOTO: ALFONSO LOZANO*

Zurbarán is represented by his staggeringly beautiful “St. Emerentiana” (c. 1635-40), a monumental panel that reveals—in the figure’s reverent, upswept gaze and sumptuous costume—this earlier Sevillian artist’s gifts for capturing both the quiet faith and discreet elegance of such subjects. The painting, one of Zurbarán’s *sui generis* series of female martyrs that equate chaste, physical beauty with spiritual perfection, is one of the museum’s true gems. A sculptural counterpoint to its sensibilities can be found nearby in the vitrine holding Luisa Roldán’s small-scale, decorated terracotta of the “Ecstasy of St. Mary Magdalen” (c. 1690), which pictures the penitent saint—open-mouthed, in a recumbent pose and dressed in crudely fashioned clothes—in an attitude of impassioned spiritual rapture and attended by two angels with rainbow-colored wings. One of five works in the museum’s holdings by the accomplished female sculptor who also hailed from Seville, it too offers a highly original reflection of prevailing Spanish mores.



*Francisco Goya's 'Duchess of Alba' (1797) PHOTO: HISPANIC SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY*

Lesser known than his magisterial “St. Jerome” (c. 1600) in the Hispanic Society’s collection but no less striking, El Greco’s “St. Luke” (c. 1590) depicts the New Testament figure up close and holding an elaborately bound manuscript and pen that allude to his role as one of the Gospels’ evangelists. The composition’s shallow space and the subject’s vivid characterization and eloquent, mannered pose reflect the Byzantine traditions that the artist, a native of Crete, brought to his later work in Spain, in an image that captures the pre-eminence of El Greco’s place in Spanish art.

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*'Portrait of a Little Girl' (c. 1638-42), by Diego Velázquez PHOTO: HISPANIC SOCIETY MUSEUM AND LIBRARY*

Three paintings by the celebrated Spanish master Velázquez (1599-1660) number among the museum's most spectacular holdings acquired by Archer M. Huntington (1870-1955), who founded the Hispanic Society as a unique oasis of Hispanic culture, and two of them currently grace the gallery's long wall. Dating from the artist's second Italian trip, his "Portrait of Camillo Astalli, Known as Cardinal Pamphili" of c. 1650-51 is executed with spare strokes of thinned pigments that edge the sitter's gauzelike collar and jauntily angled biretta, scarcely covering the tightly woven canvas. A nephew of Pope Innocent X, the sitter was reportedly both feckless and arrogant, and is subtly characterized as such by the painter.

The focal point of the expansive wall's ensemble, however, is Velázquez's small, mesmerizing and stunningly naturalistic "Portrait of a Little Girl" (c. 1638-42). Though the painting's subject and definitive chronology remain elusive, most scholars now agree that the beautifully modeled head of its charming young sitter (once thought to be the artist's granddaughter) and the unfinished, sketch-like articulation of her simple costume align the image with Velázquez's painterly, informal portraits from his middle period.

Another of Huntington's stellar buys, Goya's formidable "Duchess of Alba" (1797)—formerly the doyenne of the museum's first floor—hangs nearby and offers a brilliant summation of that later Spaniard's gifts as a portraitist. But it is Velázquez's "Portrait of a Little Girl" who now holds court, and makes it impossible to look away.

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