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Murillo's Smiles: *Two Women at a Window*

When Victor Stoichita of the University of Fribourg, Switzerland, came to CASVA this year as Edmond J. Safra Visiting Professor, he selected Bartolomé Esteban Murillo's *Two Women at a Window* (fig. 1), c. 1655/1660, as the subject of a two-day colloquy. With the

technical investigation, theoretical issues concerning framing, representation, gender, and the gaze; the question of historical sources, especially prints by northern artists; the broader European context for Murillo's work; and in conclusion, the reception of Murillo's painting by Francisco de Goya and Edouard Manet.

The decision to hold a colloquy on this particular painting had a solid foundation in Stoichita's previous research. In 1993 he was an Ailsa Mellon Bruce Visiting Senior Fellow at CASVA, and he was immediately drawn to the Murillo. This arresting work—seemingly capturing a moment of everyday life in a naturalistic style that recalls the *bodegones* of Diego Velázquez and their Caravaggesque models—was given to the National Gallery by Joseph Widener in 1942. It had been purchased by the donor's father, P.A.B. Widener, from the third Lord Heytesbury in 1894. Heytesbury's grandfather had bought the work while serving as British ambassador in Madrid in 1822–1823. In Spain the painting had been in the collection of Pedro Francisco Luján y Góngora, duke of Almodóvar del Río (1728–1794) where Joaquín Ballester made an engraving after it, entitling his print *Las Gallegas*, or *The Galician Women*. This title referred to a class of women from northwestern Spain who traveled to Madrid to work as servants and who at that time were believed to be women of easy virtue. Lord Heytesbury accordingly, if more elegantly, named his painting *The Spanish Courtesan* when he exhibited it in 1828, and since then criticism has been divided over whether the painting presents a realistic scene of literal seduction or is rather

an image of flirtation and deception that is both witty and complex. And the question of its address also follows: was this scene of urban life directed by Murillo to aristocratic collectors in a spirit of playful eroticism, and likely inspired by northern European models; or was it a more innovative and complex representation by an artist whose images of life on the street rival those of Caravaggio and Velázquez, inspiring the directness of Manet?

Victor Stoichita took a broader view. In connection with his earlier work at CASVA, he published *L'Instauration du Tableau* (Paris, 1993), appearing in English as *The Self-Aware Image* (New York, 1997). This book was followed by *Efectul Don Quijote* (Bucharest, 1995), in which the Murillo is featured. In these studies Stoichita focuses on the phenomenon of the easel painting as such, defined by its frame and characterized since the time of Leon Battista Alberti as a view through a window. *Two Women at a Window* fascinated him: quite simply, the image is framed by a window, but instead of looking through it, we are confronted by figures who look out at us, from a canvas that is half empty. One smiling young woman gazes at us directly, safely beyond the threshold of the sill, on which she rests her forearm and elbow. An older woman also engages us, smiling with her eyes as she covers her nose and mouth with her veil. Holding the frame of the shutter with her left hand, she leaves the viewer uncertain as to whether she will open it farther or close it, whether we will literally be shut out of the picture or invited into the dark, unveiled space of illusion. This casting of doubt on the distinction between



Fig. 1. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Two Women at a Window*, c. 1655/1660, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Art, Widener Collection

support of a grant from the Robert H. Smith Fund for such meetings, an international group of some twenty scholars, curators, and conservators came together to discuss every aspect of the painting. The colloquy was structured around

illusions and reality Stoichita connected to Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

With this background in place, Stoichita was ready to test his hypotheses in this year's colloquy through the direct analysis of the painting, an exercise that was both invaluable and humbling. In the painting conservation studio, the group was able to see the painting unframed and examine the various *pentimenti* (quite rare for Murillo, and especially important in the case of the angle of the shutter) as well as the condition of the canvas, to which a strip had been added at an unknown date to replace the window-sill, making it difficult to verify the exact original size. In the prints and drawings study room Professor Stoichita had assembled a number of prints by Rembrandt, Adriaen van Ostade, Ferdinand Bol, and others, all showing figures in windows. The prints demonstrated the wide popularity of this theme in the seventeenth-century, but the anecdotal quality and small scale of these works made it difficult to support the hypothesis that they played a role in Murillo's conception. If anything, the printed images served to emphasize the extraordinary importance of illusion in *Two Women at a Window* and the danger of dividing motif from compositional effects. The confrontation of the viewer by life-sized female figures is the very subject of Murillo's work.

Such confrontation is characteristic of Rembrandt's various contemporary paintings of figures at windows, and it is tempting to see a relationship between, for example, his *Young Girl at the Window*, 1651 (Nationalmuseum, Stockholm), and the National Gallery's Murillo. But while prints by Rembrandt probably had a limited circulation in Spain in Murillo's day, we have no knowledge of the collecting of his paintings there. Furthermore, direct comparison again brought out fundamental differences: in contrast to Murillo's direct and instantaneous image, the poses of Rembrandt's figures are contemplative and enduring.

Murillo's *Two Women at a Window* has been associated with the popular Spanish saying "La mujer ventanera, uva de la calle," or "woman at the window, grape of the street" (that is, ripe for the picking), and there is a rich seventeenth-century discourse about transgressive women at the window on the street and the young urban gallants they enticed. Murillo's painting, however, refuses to yield to such a narrative or anecdotal interpretation, as do several other remarkable works by the artist. Outstanding among these is the *Four Figures on the Steps of a House* (fig. 2). Next to an eager and laughing youth, a quizzical woman holds up her toca, or scarf, her finger delicately crooked. An older woman gently holds the head of a reclining boy in tattered clothing to look for lice. The bold eyeglasses through which she stares emphasize that all three of these characters look at the viewer who interrupts them. The boy remains unaware, and, like the shutter, closes the scene, which is set back on a lintel. Revealing and concealing, in Stoichita's words, and engaging in a discourse on shame and morality, Murillo's images articulate the conflict of illusion and disillusion that is played out by so many great artists of the period, from Caravaggio to Velázquez.

Murillo (1617–1682) was a deeply religious man, the youngest of fourteen children who was orphaned at eleven. Seville, where he lived, was a poor and plague-ridden city. Yet he both achieved great success there and devoted himself to charity. Should we be tempted to think that he painted *ventaneras* and people of the street just because these were fashionable genre subjects among aristocratic collectors, we need only recall how radically he turns viewing around in these paintings, engaging us with interrogating, sometimes seductive looks that challenge reality itself. Murillo founded an academy in Seville in 1660, and in his late self-portrait he presents himself as a sober gentleman, flanked by the instruments of drawing and painting, his hand reaching out to



Fig. 2. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Four Figures on the Steps of a House*, c. 1655–1660, oil on canvas, Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth



Fig. 3. Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *Self-Portrait*, c. 1670–1675, oil on canvas, National Gallery, London

destroy the illusion of the frame (fig. 3). For Victor Stoichita, it is this challenging of the "aesthetic frontier" that links Murillo to Cervantes, and the metaphysical doubt of the "Don Quixote Effect." • Elizabeth Cropper, *Dean, Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts*