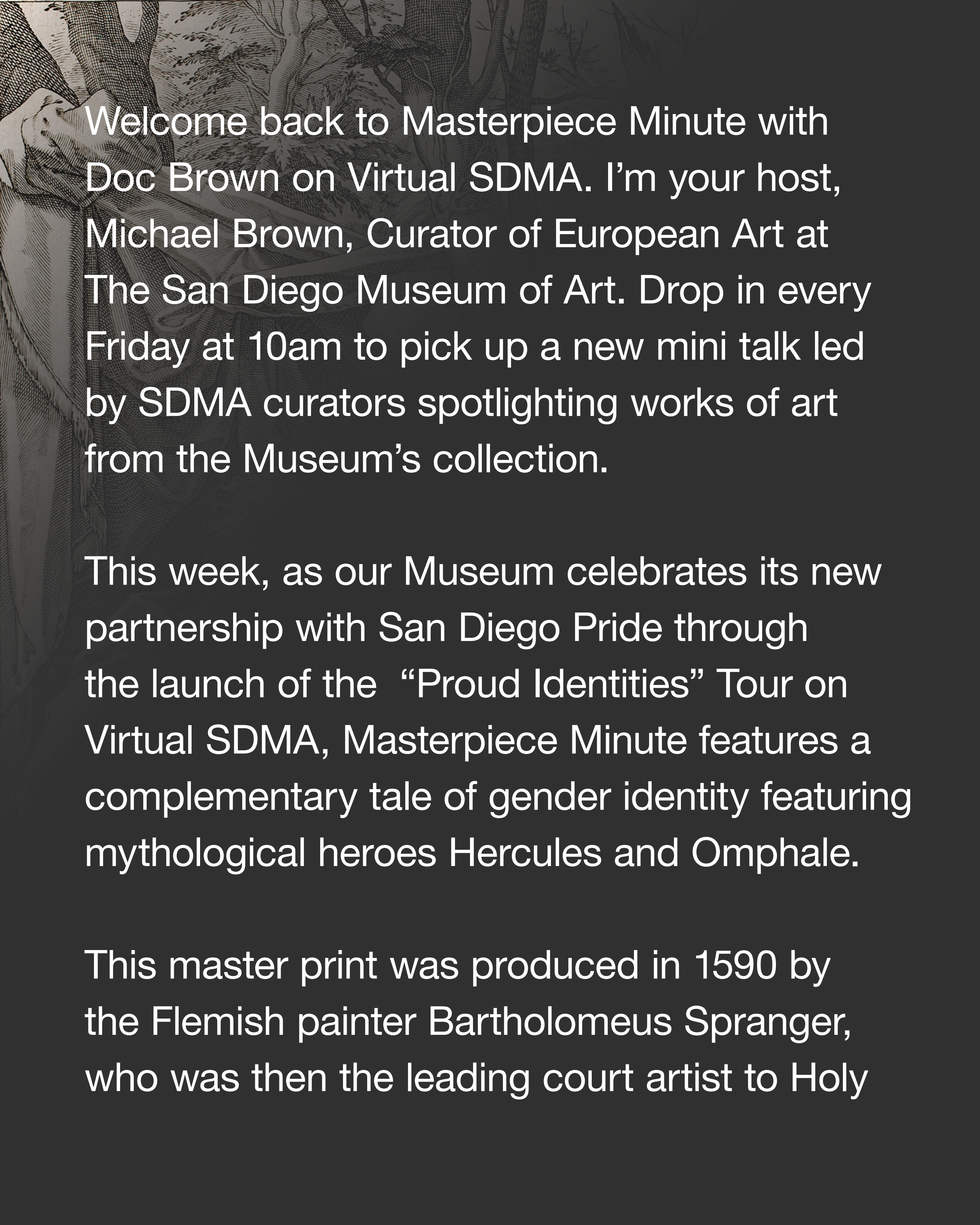


MASTERPIECE
MINUTE



A detailed engraving of a man in a forest, likely a hermit or saint, with a dog at his feet. The man is shown from the chest up, looking upwards with a contemplative expression. He is wearing a simple, dark robe. The background is a dense forest with many trees and foliage. The style is characteristic of 16th-century Flemish art.

Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute with Doc Brown on Virtual SDMA. I'm your host, Michael Brown, Curator of European Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in every Friday at 10am to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

This week, as our Museum celebrates its new partnership with San Diego Pride through the launch of the "Proud Identities" Tour on Virtual SDMA, Masterpiece Minute features a complementary tale of gender identity featuring mythological heroes Hercules and Omphale.

This master print was produced in 1590 by the Flemish painter Bartholomeus Spranger, who was then the leading court artist to Holy

Roman Emperor Rudolf II in Prague (now Czech Republic). Spranger had worked in Paris, Rome, and Vienna for more than ten years before joining Rudolph's entourage in 1581. Throughout his journeys, Spranger absorbed Michelangelo's vibrant palette and muscular anatomies, and took Albrecht Dürer as his artistic and intellectual forebear, especially as a printmaker.

Spranger was one of the first truly international artists. His prints reached the far ends of the earth, resulting in the artist's widespread fame and artistic influence throughout Europe and the Americas.

This scene depicts the divine Greek hero Heracles (Hercules to the Ancient Romans)

during the three years he served Queen Omphale of the Lydians, a people considered barbarians by the Greeks.

In Spranger's ingenious pictorial treatment, based on Ovid's descriptive poem, Hercules and Omphale have assumed one another's genders and gender-specific roles. She wears his Nemean lion skin and slings his club over her shoulder, while Hercules wears the queen's robe and spins a fine thread of wool with her distaff.

The iconography of the distaff, which is notably also a term for the matriarchal side of a family tree, is balanced by the seated hero's idealized male musculature. In antiquity, the embodiment of both male and female traits was an

esteemed characteristic of many heroes and heroines.

This duality in gender identity, emphasized in the print's poetic "love conquers all" inscription, was not only permissible in Ancient Greece and Rome but was celebrated, as were the heroes' and gods' multi-gender attractions, in the literature of the day.

Spranger may have seen more than a little of himself in the figure of Hercules dutifully serving his queen, as Spranger himself not only served Emperor Rudolph as his official painter, but also as his personal valet.

I hope you'll allow me a final speculation. In its distinctive appearance, Hercules's

left hand closely mirrors that of famed printmaker Hendrick Goltzius (featured in another Masterpiece Minute episode), whose engraving immortalized his own gnarled fingers. Goltzius, a close friend of Spranger's, made dozens of engravings after his drawings. The two friends formed one of the most successful collaborations in the history of art, all accomplished with Spranger in Prague while Goltzius continued to work remotely from Antwerp (in Belgium), long before the existence of Zoom.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute. Thanks for joining us here on Virtual SDMA – catch ya next Friday!

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