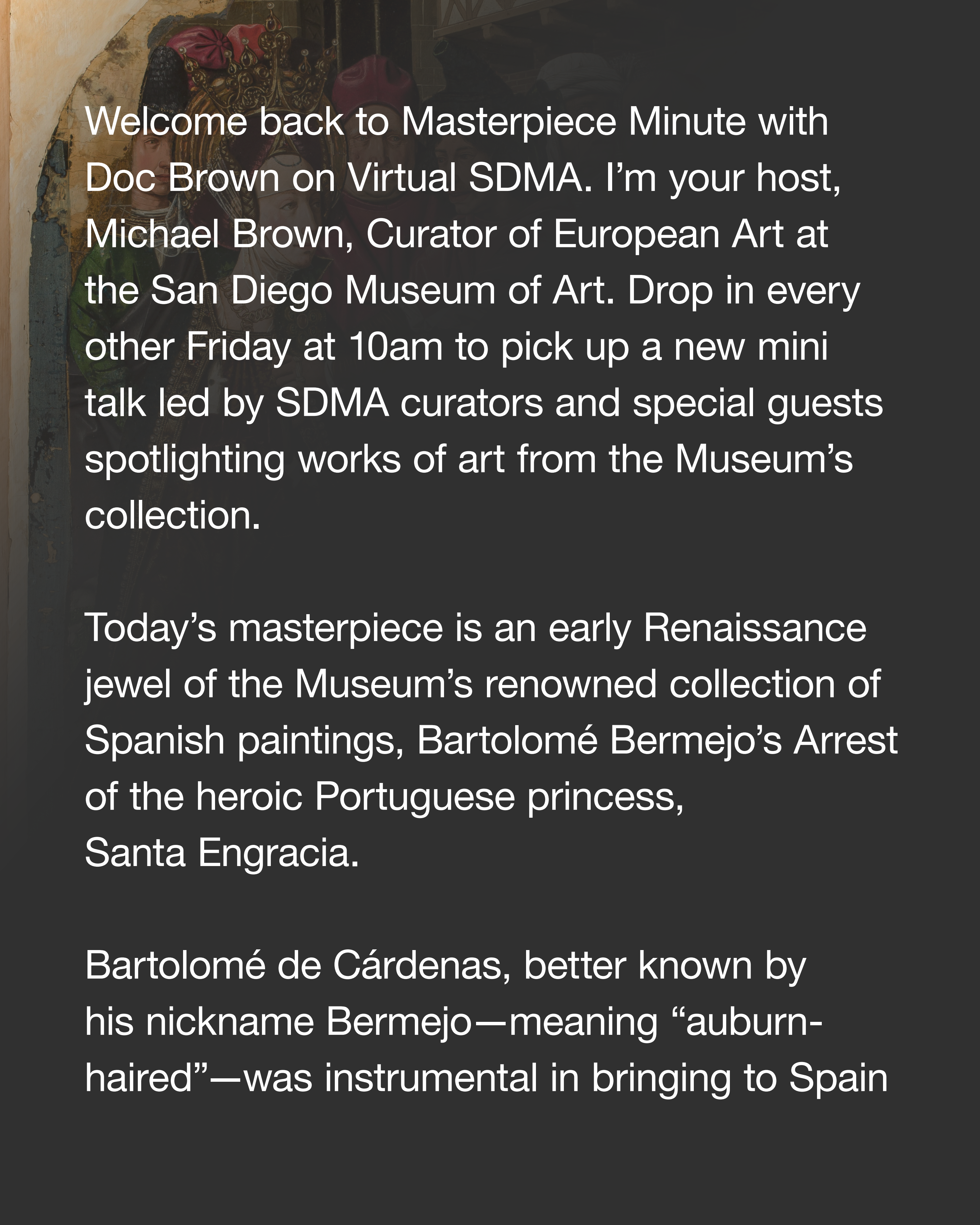


# MASTERPIECE MINUTE







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 other Friday at 10am to pick up a new mini talk led by SDMA curators and special guests spotlighting works of art from the Museum's collection.

Today's masterpiece is an early Renaissance jewel of the Museum's renowned collection of Spanish paintings, Bartolomé Bermejo's Arrest of the heroic Portuguese princess, Santa Engracia.

Bartolomé de Cárdenas, better known by his nickname Bermejo—meaning “auburn-haired”—was instrumental in bringing to Spain






the technique of oil painting pioneered in the Netherlands by Rogier van der Weyden and Jan van Eyck.

If we are to believe an inscription on his most famous painting, Bermejo was born in Córdoba, the great cosmopolitan capital of Muslim Iberia, known as Al-Andalus, where Christianity, Judaism, and Islam flourished for much of the Middle Ages.

Bermejo was an itinerant artist, and as his fame grew, he followed commissions throughout the kingdom of Aragon, near Spain's east coast, including Valencia, Zaragoza, Barcelona, and the small mountain town of Daroca. It was in Daroca in 1474 that he painted two major altarpieces, one for the church of Santo





Domingo de Silos, and the other of Santa Engracia for the Fernández Fiero family chapel in the church of San Pedro.

The church was destroyed in the early 19th century, but the altarpiece has survived, albeit in separate panels divided between SDMA, Boston's Isabella Stewart Gardiner Museum, and collections in the Spanish cities of Bilbao and Daroca.

The scene in our panel took place during the Roman occupation of the Iberian Peninsula around the year 303, during Diocletian's final campaign to purge Christianity from the Empire before Constantine took over. In the dramatic climax of the narrative, Engracia, the Portuguese princess who has been negotiating



A detail from a painting, likely the 'Entrada de Isabel y Fernando en Zaragoza' by Juan de Juanes. It shows a woman, Isabella of Castile, wearing a red crown and a green dress, being escorted by men in armor. The scene is set in a city with a visible archway in the background.

with Roman authorities in Zaragoza on behalf of her Christian subjects, is taken into custody by Roman soldiers. She rides Christ-like into the city to meet her fate with dignity and courage, sitting side-saddle in full regalia. The dappled grey she rides is a Lusitano horse, the royal breed named for Lusitania, the Latin word the Romans used for Portugal.

Each antagonist appears as a distinct individual, each a tour-de-force portrait, dressed in Renaissance costume, probably following the patrons' wishes to appear themselves in the scene. Likewise, the archway in the background probably reflects the original Islamic-inspired Mudéjar architecture of San Pedro.





The panel and its surviving counterparts, which depict the princess's torture, martyrdom, and enthronement, were reunited at the Museum del Prado in Madrid in 2018. Santa Engracia is celebrated each year on April 16 in Spain, especially in Aragón.

How about an HR fun fact? Bermejo, like his famed contemporary Leonardo da Vinci (each brilliant in his own right, mind you), was notorious for leaving projects unfinished. For this reason, his employment contract in Daroca (which survives!) includes a clause that failure to complete the altarpiece would result in not only lost wages but Bermejo's excommunication. Thankfully, he finished it.



This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute. Thanks for joining us here on Virtual SDMA!

BALBOA PARK

THE SAN DIEGO  
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