



*CM* 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 the first Friday of each month at 10:00 a.m. 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 by nineteenth-century Spanish artist Mariano Fortuny y Marsal. It is an extraordinary reminder of etching's power to conjure drama and emotion, and to explore the intrigues of the human condition.

Mariano Fortuny was born in 1838 in the Catalan town of Reus, an important artistic center – especially for ceramic production

– during Spain’s Islamic period (711 – 1492).  
By the height of his early fame in the 1860s, Fortuny’s oil paintings were commissioned by some of the most important collectors in Europe and, increasingly, the United States. By the time he married Cecilia de Madrazo in 1867, whose father served as director of the Prado, Fortuny was already an international sensation.

His printmaking, a key source for his renown outside Europe, relied primarily on traditional acid-bath etching practices, including aquatint for tonal subtleties, and touches of drypoint to heighten details. His approach to printmaking was thus modeled on that of Rembrandt, Goya, and Jusepe de Ribera.

*The Anchorite* (meaning hermit) is among

Fortuny's most accomplished works in any medium. It combines a complex composition featuring a solitary human figure in an ominous, inhospitable landscape. Rembrandt's foreboding *Three Trees* landscape etching, which he famously reworked in several states, as Fortuny did with *The Anchorite*, provided the artist's visual inspiration. The sense of isolation, desperation, and the fragility of life imbue Fortuny's work with great emotional force that bridges the Baroque with the emerging Modern world, in much the same way as Goya's famed *Drowning Dog* in the Prado. Here Fortuny's ambiguous approach both modernizes and universalizes the figure's experience.

While there is nothing overtly religious about Fortuny's image, ascetic desert-bound hermit

saints such as Catherine of Egypt or Jerome were common in Spanish painting and sculpture of the seventeenth century. Fortuny was intensely aware of his artistic heritage, having spent countless hours studying and copying the works of El Greco and Velázquez at the Museo del Prado.

While Fortuny made Rome his base for most of his career, he traveled often, making trips to Paris, London, and notably several trips to Morocco. While in Morocco, Fortuny made numerous studies and further developed an appreciation for Islamic art and culture. He also became a serious collector of historical Islamic and Japanese art. While Fortuny tragically died at the age of 36 from malaria, Cecilia continued to champion her husband's work

and collection, which can both now be seen in the world's leading museums.

*The Anchorite* etching was part of a series published by Goupil, the Paris art dealer who maintained a strong presence among international and American collectors. At the time of its production, both Theo and Vincent van Gogh worked for Goupil. The etching even prompted Vincent to write to Theo about Fortuny's importance as an artist of truth, something that clearly resonated with Van Gogh's own artistic sensibility.

This has been Doc Brown with Masterpiece Minute, thanks for listening here on Virtual SDMA!



Today's masterpiece: Mariano Fortuny y Marsal (Spanish, 1838–1874). *The Anchorite*, 1869. Etching on laid paper. Gift of Norman Leitman in Memory of Todd Butler, 2020.388.

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