



**Today's Masterpiece:** Francisco de Zurbarán, [\*Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist\*](#), 1658. Oil on canvas. Gift of Anne R., Amy and Irene Putnam, 1935.22.



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute 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 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 the seventeenth-century Spanish painter, Francisco de Zurbarán. Painted in 1658, *Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist* is among the finest and most moving compositions of the final decade of the artist's career, which he spent in Madrid, Spain's capital and the site of the royal court.

Regular listeners might recall that in Episode 6, *Masterpiece Minute* covered the story of the *Virgin and Child's* antique Spanish frame, which has graced the painting since 2018, when the museum purchased the frame with the help of an anonymous donor. Today's episode focuses on the painting itself, which has its own tales to tell.

For the first half of the 1600s, Zurbarán was Spain's most successful painter, working in the bustling metropolis of Sevilla for religious institutions and Church hierarchy, as well as for local nobility. Located in Andalucía in the south of Spain, Sevilla was the busiest port in Europe, known then as the gateway to the Americas.

For much of his career, Zurbarán benefited from Sevilla's transatlantic trade by exporting dozens of canvases (mainly executed by his large workshop) to Mexico and Perú. However, from around 1647 to 1652, Sevilla suffered a deadly epidemic known as the Great Plague, which decimated an estimated 25 to 49% of its population. The plague's victims including Zurbarán's colleague, Juan Martínez Montañés, Spain's most influential sculptor, and Juan de Zurbarán, the painter's son, an exceptionally talented still-life painter trained in his father's studio.

Zurbarán finally decided to leave Sevilla, seeking a rejuvenated career in the royal court city of Madrid, home to his childhood friend, Diego Velázquez, painter to the king. Through Velázquez, Zurbarán had access to paintings by Titian and Peter Paul Rubens in the royal collection, as well as fine pigments and painting materials. In turn, Zurbarán's palette – as seen here – shifted to feature rich blues and soft pinks, bathed in soft atmospheric light. His new technique adopted from Rubens and Velázquez, gives his late paintings an underlying glow. At the end of a brilliant career, Zurbarán was still willing to experiment with a more modern style.

Recent technical analysis (using x-ray and infra-red methods to see through paint layers), shows that Zurbarán made important changes to the poignant scene of the baby Jesus being teased with a goldfinch by his cousin, John the Baptist.

Most significantly, the painter replaced the furniture at lower left and moved his signature – on a trompe l'oeil paper sticker – to allow for the addition of a beautifully rendered still life of apples on a silver plate. The apples, at once a virtuoso genre depiction and a powerful symbol of Adam and Eve's original sin, undoubtedly



balance the figures' diagonal composition. But knowing the apples' late addition and the plate's position opposite John the Baptist (Juan Bautista in Spanish), viewers might also imagine the detail as a tribute to the artist's son, Juan, who had achieved a youthful mastery of still-life at his father's side in the years before the Great Plague.

This has been Michael Brown with Masterpiece Minute – thanks for listening here on Virtual SDMA!



**Today's Masterpiece:** Francisco de Zurbarán, [\*Virgin and Child with the Young Saint John the Baptist\*](#), 1658. Oil on canvas. Gift of Anne R., Amy and Irene Putnam, 1935.22.