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Bartolomé Esteban Murillo
(Seville, 1618 – 1682)

La Virgen de la Faja
(*The Virgin of the Sash*)

c. 1660

oil on canvas

137 x 112 cm.;

54 x 44 1/8 in.

Provenance

Juan Federighi or Juan de Federigui (Archdeacon of Carmona and member of the Cathedral Chapter of Seville; mentioned in the inventory), 1673;

By descent to his nephew Luis de Federigui;

In the possession of the Marquise de la Parada, before 1805;

Bought by Il Conde de Aguila (Miguel de Espinosa y Tello de Guzmán, b. 1715), Seville, in 1805 (his name is inscribed on the verso of the painting);

Baron Isidoro de Taylor (1789 – 1879), 17 January 1837;

Louis Philippe I (1773 – 1850), King of the French (1830 – 1848), Paris, 1838 (exhibited in his Spanish Gallery in the Louvre, Paris, from 1838 until 1848, when paintings from the collection of the King were brought to England after the revolution in February of that year);

His posthumous sale, London, Christie's, 16 May 1853, where acquired for £1,500 by Colnaghi (possibly acting as agents for the Duc de Montpensier);

Duc de Montpensier, Palacio de San Telmo, Seville, 1866;

By whom lent to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1874 – 1880;

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Inherited by Antonio de Orléans, Palacio de Sanlúcar de Barrameda, 1883 (in 1892, the painting (no. 170) appears as the most expensive in the valuation of the partitional notebook of Antonio Maria de Orléans, Duke of Montpensier, at 80,000 pesetas);
Described as still at the Palacio de Sanlúcar de Barrameda, in 1908;
Sale, Paris, Drouot, Duc d'Orléans Sale, 19 June 1937, lot 6, acquired for 11,600 francs by 'Berger' (the buyer can almost certainly be identified as Kleinberger Galleries: a family firm of art dealers founded in France by Franz Kleinberger);
Zacharie Birtschansky (c. 1889 – 1950), Paris, 1937/1938;
H. Kropik, Bad Aibling, Germany, c. 1979 (bought from the widow of Zacharie Birtschansky);
Margot Ernst, Saarbrücken, Germany, 1979;
Sale, London, Sotheby's, 5 July 1989, lot 99, for £1.7 million;
Umeda Art Boeki, Osaka, Japan, 1989 (bought for a private collection in Japan);
With Richard Knight Fine Art Ltd., TEFAF Maastricht, Netherlands, 2004;
Private collection, Switzerland, 2017/18.

Literature

N. de la Cruz Bahamonde, Conde de Maule, *Viage de España, Francia e Italia*, vol. XXIV, Cap. III, Madrid, Sancha/Cadiz, Manuel Bosch, 1806-1813, pp. 251-252;
E. Davies, *The life of Bartolomé E. Murillo*, London, Bensley and Son, 1819, p. 96;
F. Hall Standish, *Seville and its Vicinity*, (Chapter XIII, 'General Remarks on Seville'), London, Black and Armstrong, 1840, p. 315;
F. Gonzalez de León, *Noticia artistica, historica y curiosa de todos los edificios publicos, sagrados y profanos de esta muy noble, muy leal, muy heroica e invicta Ciudad de Sevilla, y de muchas casas particulares con todo lo que les sirve de adorno artistico, antiguedades, inscripciones y curiosidades que contienen*, vol. I, Seville, José Hidalgo, 1844, pp. 131- 132;
R. Ford, 'The Sale of Louis Philippe's Spanish pictures', *The Athenaeum*, 14 May 1853, Part I, no. 1333, pp. 593-594;
C. Blanc, 'B. Esteban Murillo', in *Histoire des peintures de toutes les écoles – Ecole espagnole*, Paris, Jules Renouard, 1869, pp. 5-6;
W. Stirling Maxwell, *Catalogue of prints engraved from the works of Diego Rodriguez de Silva Velazquez and Bartolomé Esteban Murillo*, London 1873, privately printed, pp. 65-66;
Museum of Fine Arts, *Catalogue of Pictures belonging to H.R.H. the Duke de Montpensier and of other pictures*, Boston, Alfred Mudge, 1874, p. 3, cat. no. 6;
C. Boyd Curtis, *Velazquez and Murillo: a descriptive and historical catalogue of the works of Don Diego De Silva Velazquez and Bartolomé*, London 1883, p. 156, cat. no. 101;
W. Stirling Maxwell, *Annals of the Artists of Spain*, London 1891, vol. III, p. 984;
C. Justi, *Murillo*, Leipzig, Seemann, 1892, p. 46;

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- H. Knackfuss, *Murillo*, Bielefeld/Leipzig, Verlag von Velhagen und Klasing, 1896, pp. 73-74, fig. 59;
- A. F. Calvert, *Murillo. A Biography and Appreciation. With 165 illustrations reproduced from the most famous of Murillo's pictures*, London, John Lane, The Bodley Head/New York, John Lane, 1907, pp. 136-137, no. 109;
- A. Liebmann Mayer, *Murillo*, Klassiker der Kunst, 1923, p. 66;
- A. Liebmann Mayer, *Murillo, des Meisters Gemälde*, Berlin/Leipzig, Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1923, p. 66 with full-page reproduction, p. 290, p. 302;
- P. Guinard, *Dauzats et Blanchard. Peintres de l'Espagne romantique*, Paris, Presse Universitaires, 1967, p. 224;
- J. Antonio Gaya Nuño, *L'opera completa di Murillo*, Milan, Rizzoli, 1978, cat. no. 183;
- D. Angulo Iniguez, *Letter to Margot Ernst*, 13 March 1980 (available upon request);
- D. Angulo Iniguez, *Murillo*, vol. I: 'Su Vida, Su Arte, Su Obra', Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1981, pp. 429-430;
- D. Angulo Iniguez, *Murillo*, vol. II: 'Catalogo Critico', Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1981, pp. 161-162, cat. no. 167;
- D. Angulo Iniguez, *Murillo*, vol. III: 'Laminas', Madrid, Espasa-Calpe, 1981, no. 102;
- J. Baticle & C. Marinas, *La Galerie espagnole de Louis-Philippe au Louvre 1838-1848*, Paris, Ministère de la Culture, RMN, 1981, pp. 116-117, no. 160;
- M. Mena Marqués & E. Valdivieso, in *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo: 1617-1682*, exh. cat., Museo del Prado, Madrid 1982; Royal Academy of Arts, London 1983; (ed.) of the English catalogue: J. Martineau, London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1982, p. 900, reproduced on p. 169;
- M. Mena Marqués & E. Valdivieso, in *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo*, Katalog der Ausstellung des Museo del Prado Madrid und der Royal Academy of Arts London (1982 Madrid, 1983 London), Berlin, Fröhlich & Kaufmann, 1982, p. 158, cat. no. 26;
- E. Valdivieso, *Murillo. Catálogo razonado de pinturas*, Madrid, El Viso, 2010, p. 354, cat. no. 128;
- H. Pérez Gallardo, 'Murillo en la fotografía del siglo XIX: Razones para una estética del sentimiento', in *Murillo y su estela en Sevilla*, exh. cat., (ed.) B. Navarrete Prieto, Seville, ICAS (Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla), 2017, pp. 111-112;
- B. Navarrete Prieto, 'Los afectos y el espacio privado', in *Murillo y su estela en Sevilla*, exh. cat., (ed.) B. Navarrete Prieto, Seville, ICAS (Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla), 2017, p. 217;
- B. Navarrete Prieto, 'Virgen de la faja [33]', in *Murillo y su estela en Sevilla*, exh. cat., (ed.) B. Navarrete Prieto, Seville, ICAS (Instituto de la Cultura y las Artes de Sevilla), 2017, pp. 218-220;
- P. García Ponce de León, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo. El Pintor de la Devoción*, Madrid/Alcobendas, Libsa, 2018, p. 169;

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L. Duffy-Zeballos, 'Las escenas de devoción de Murillo', in *Murillo IV centenario*, exh. cat., (eds.) I. Cano Rivero & M. del Valme Muñoz Rubio, Seville, Junta de Andalucía, Consejería de Cultura, 2018, pp. 46-47.

Exhibited

Paris, Musée du Louvre, La Galerie Espagnole de Louis Philippe, 1838 – 1848;
Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Collection of the Duc de Montpensier, 1874 – 1880;
Madrid, Museo del Prado, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo: 1617 – 1682*, 8 October – 12 December 1982;
London, Royal Academy of Arts, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo: 1617 – 1682*, 15 January – 27 March 1983;
Seville, Espacio Santa Clara, *Murillo y su estela en Sevilla*, 6 December 2017 – 8 April 2018.

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This famous oil painting and devotional image by Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617, baptized 1 January 1618, Seville – died 3 April 1682, Seville) is one of the few works of art that was given a permanent name and its own title in the history of art. Since the beginning of the 19th century, this painting has been known as the *Virgen de la Faja*. The rolled up swaddling band or sash, in Spanish ‘*faja*’, is undoubtedly the eponymous element of this painting of Mary. In addition to the name *Virgen de la Faja*, there is also the equivalent title *Nuestra Señora de la Faja*. This name is also used in other languages: in French the painting is called *Vierge à la Ceinture* or in rare cases *Vierge languant l'Enfant Jésus*; in English *Virgin of the Sash*, *Our Lady of the Girdle*, the *Virgin of the Swaddling Clothes*, *Virgin Swaddling the Infant*, or *The Virgin of the Swathing Band*; while in Italian it is called *Madonna della Fascia*.

Murillo breaks with the traditional representation of the Madonna with Child in this devotional image: neither does the Virgin look at the viewer, nor does she present the Christ Child to the worshipper, nor is she in prayer or devotion. Even among the numerous Murillo depictions of the Virgin Mary, which remain entirely in accordance with the standardised scheme, this work, the *Virgen de la Faja*, is unique. Here Murillo skilfully combines the devotional image with his typical painting genre. He shows Mary as a laywoman, a young mother who makes a quotidian and earthly gesture by changing her naked child's bare linen bandages. The Holy Mother appears calm and serene, at the same time graceful and loving. Next to her, on a stone pedestal, lies the folded sash or bandage, which gives the painting its name and which still has to be wrapped around the infant.

Even the Christ Child lying on Mary's lap does not look at the viewer, nor does the child look at the Virgin. The infant, appearing alive, stretches his right arm towards his mother, tightens his legs and thus makes it easier for his mother to wrap him in linen. Only a delicate nimbus in the shape of a radiating wreath, shining above the Christ Child's blond hair, points to his divine origin. The view of the Holy Child, illuminated by a golden yellow, divine, warm light, also serves as an indication of this.

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Two musical angels accompany the scene: one plays a violin and looks at the Child's face, while the other plays a mandolin and looks at the Virgin Mary. Six cherubs float above in a circular dance, their outline dissolving in the heavenly light. The soft, airy contours of the painting style, which refers to the painter's knowledge of Van Dyck's works, and the divine, warm, golden light, which shines down on the group of people from above, underline the tenderness and dignified elegance of the motherly gesture. At the same time, however, a cold, hard, white, worldly light that seems to shine in from the right side illuminates the seated mother and the baby stretching out on her lap. The composition is a sophisticated play of diagonals: warm and cold tones, light and dark shades.

Murillo masterfully blends the worldly with the heavenly. Both the lighting and the manner in which the Virgin Mary has been depicted blend together with the earthly gesture of the Infant's wrapping. Although the inclusion of realistic motifs may have been customary since Caravaggio, and Murillo's predecessors such as Ribera, Zubarán and Cano played with them effectively, Murillo's interpretation is unique. Free of any drama or drastic play of light, he shows with the greatest naturalness and truthfulness the human gesture of the Holy Mother. The only subtle and subliminal tragedy in the painting is not immediately apparent: Mary wraps the linen sheets around her newborn child, as if already suspecting that such linen sheets would also be needed at her son's funeral. Mary's seemingly melancholic facial expression could thus reflect the anticipation of Christ's Passion. The bandage rolled on the stone pedestal therefore acquires a double meaning: on the one hand a baby wrap and on the other a *linteamina*, a linen bandage used for Christ's funeral. The same applies to the linen cloth that Mary wraps devoutly around the child's minute body, just as one would later wrap the body of Christ in the Sinden: the shroud.

Murillo's subtlety and spirituality gives the figures a sense of humanity, and makes them appear natural and true. By elegantly combining the genre image with religious themes, he thus illustrates the main virtue and duty of a Christian: mercy.

Murillo experienced the value of charity very early in life. His wealthy father died in 1627, followed a year later also by his mother. The ten-year-old Murillo was not sent to an

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orphanage, but instead taken in by his aunt and placed under her husband's pouch. Years later, in 1663, Murillo lost his wife. Allegedly, as his first biographer Acisclo Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco (1653 – 1726) wrote in 1724, mourning prevented Murillo from touching a paintbrush for a whole year. Of his alleged eleven children, four survived and gradually left the house. Instead of considering a new marriage, Murillo remained alone, joined the Order of the Merciful Brothers and began a magnificent cycle of paintings for the hospital and church 'De la Caridad' (1666 – 1672) in Seville. This ensemble of paintings is entirely dedicated to Christian mercy. Already in the first biography of Murillo, published in Madrid in 1724 and dedicated to the most important Spanish painters of the 16th and 17th centuries, Palomino states: '...[Murillo] was favoured not only by the majesty of his art, but also by the gifts of his nature, as a good man, of amiable character, humble and modest'.¹ Palomino even claims that in 1670 the Spanish King Charles II wanted to make him a court painter and bring him to Madrid. The fact is that Murillo died in Seville and, according to legend, in extremely poor circumstances. The renowned and extremely popular artist is said to have used his income for charitable purposes, so much so that he died in poverty.

It can be assumed that the present painting was specially commissioned. Already in the year 1673, the *Virgen de la Faja* is mentioned in the inventory of the Archdeacon of Carmona and member of the Cathedral Chapter, Juan Federighi.² From the secondary literature it is not clear when and how it finally became part of the family property of the Conde de Aguila. The publication by Edward Davies (1819), who translated numerous Spanish texts into English, states that the work was offered for sale in the street outside the Seville Cathedral and immediately purchased by the Conde de Aguila.³ Davies can only be referring to Miguel de Espinosa y Tello de Guzmán (b. 1715), the II Conde del Aguila. This Conde de Aguila, head of the city of Seville, appeared in the annals for his extraordinary love of art and his remarkable collection of artworks, paintings, books, manuscripts and drawings. This art collection remained property of the family of the Conde de Aguila for generations.

Murillo's works, especially his pictures of the Virgin Mary, were already very popular during the artist's lifetime. Copies of the *Virgen de la Faja* were made immediately after the completion of the work, allegedly two by his best pupil, Alonso Miguel de Tovar, one of

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which is still in the Museum of Cádiz. Murillo's genre paintings, which in the 18th century were the most popular subject on the art market, almost all went abroad, so that in 1779 Spain even imposed an export ban on these highly coveted works.⁴ With the Napoleonic Confiscations in Spain, many more paintings by Murillo and other Spanish masters came to Paris. But after the second Congress of Vienna in 1815, these works had to be returned. The secularization in Spain, that had been imposed since 1810 by Napoleon, brought many religious paintings to the European market, but most of Murillo's works had already found new admirers on the spot or in his own country. Nevertheless, the popularity of Murillo's paintings is not only appreciated in Seville or in Spain. For centuries, Murillo has enjoyed boundless recognition.

The Spanish masters reached their peak of esteem in the middle of the 19th century, when the French King Louis Philippe I (1773 – 1850) dedicated an entire wing to this art in the Louvre. The globetrotter, writer, theatre director and philanthropist, Isidore Justin Séverin Taylor (1789 – 1879), who was promoted to barony by the French King Charles X in 1825, played a decisive role in this development. Thanks to Taylor, the huge obelisk from Luxor came to Paris in 1829, which still adorns the Place de la Concorde today. It is also owing to Taylor's merit that the *Virgen de la Faja* came to Paris.

The French King Louis Philippe I, a great art lover, decided in 1835 to extend the Louvre collection with a Spanish gallery. In fact, the Paris collection had very few works by Spanish masters. In 1835, Louis Philippe named Taylor as his art commissioner and gave him the task to sift through Spain in search of suitable paintings to expand the Louvre. On 17 January 1837, Taylor purchased two works from the Conde de Aguila, one by Velázquez and the other by Murillo, the *Virgen de la Faja*.⁵ On 7 January 1838, the Louvre inaugurated the new wing of the Spanish Gallery, where all visitors could admire works by Zurbarán, Velázquez, Ribera, Cano and Murillo. The gallery owned 39 works by Murillo, but not all of them were exhibited. The *Madonna with the Sash*, on the other hand, was not to be missed at the festive opening in 1838, and the work remained visible to the public in the Spanish Gallery until 1848. Numerous engravings, lithographs and replicas from this period bear witness to the popularity of the painting (see, for example, fig. 1).⁶

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Due to the February Revolution of 1848, Louis Philippe had to abdicate and fled to England disguised as 'Mr. Smith'. Since the purchase of all paintings from Spain had been financed by the private, royal treasury, the Spanish Gallery in the Louvre had to be closed and the works followed the abdicated King into English exile. Nevertheless, Murillo's legacy at the museum is attested to by the decoration of its Salon Carré, which was transformed from being a space used to house the work of the academicians into a 'sanctuary of painting from all times and countries' in 1849. Four artist's names were chosen to embellish each corner of the room: Raphael, Rubens, Poussin, and Murillo (figs. 2-5).

Louis Philippe died in Claremont (Surrey) in 1850 and three years later, on 6, 8 and 16 May 1853, his collection was auctioned in London at Christie's. Via the middleman Colnaghi, the *Virgen de la Faja* was added to the collection of the Duke of Montpensier, Antoine d'Orléans (1824 – 1890), who also fled to England after the February Revolution in France, but then settled in Seville, where he fought for the succession to the throne as husband of the Spanish Infanta. Murillo's Virgin and Child thus returned to Seville, where the painting decorated, for many years, the rooms of the Palacio de San Telmo. Because of the uncertain political situation, the Duke of Montpensier sent his entire collection of paintings to America, where they were exhibited at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston from 1874 to 1880. Murillo's *Virgen de la Faja* also travelled across the Atlantic and remained in Boston for six years. The painting, along with the entire ducal collection, then returned to Spain, where it was documented to have been in the Palacio de Sanlúcar de Barrameda, near Cádiz and not far from Seville, from 1883. Even after the death of Antoine d'Orléans, the art collection remained in Spain at least until 1908. It was probably through the various branches of the Orléans family that the painting arrived in Paris, where it was sold at Drouot auction house on 19 June 1937. The buyer signed with the pseudonym 'Berger', which probably refers to Franz Kleinberger. The *Virgen de la Faja* entered the art collection of the dealer Zacharie Birtschansky in the same year. In 1979, his widow sold it to a German art dealer (H. Kropik, Bad Aibling), from where it was transferred to Margot Ernst's collection. In 1982, on the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the death of Murillo, the Prado organized a major retrospective of the work of the Spanish master. For three months, the public could admire the *Virgen de la Faja*, and then for another three months at the Royal Academy of

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Arts in London. Since the dissolution of the Spanish Gallery in the Louvre in 1848, meaning for 134 years, Murillo's masterpiece had no longer been on public display. On 5 July 1989, the painting was auctioned at Sotheby's in London for a record price of £1.7 million (three times the usual market value at that time). Once again, this unique painting then disappeared for years into a Japanese private collection, from where it continued passing into European private collections. In 2004 it appeared at the TEFAF art fair in Maastricht.

On the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the birth year of Murillo, the city of Seville, together with the regional government, organized a 'Murillo Year' with numerous exhibitions, tours of the city, concerts, countless events and even an international congress. In one of these exhibitions, *Murillo y su estela en Sevilla* in the Santa-Clara Convent, which took place from 6 December 2017 to 8 April 2018 in Seville, the *Virgen de la Faja*, solemnly and admirably restored, was presented to the public.⁷

It is astonishing that this painting by Murillo – despite its outstanding quality, art-historical significance, and unique and eminent provenance – is still in a private collection today.

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Figure 1. Antoine-Alphée Piaud after Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, *La Vierge à la Ceinture*, in C. Blanc, 'B. Esteban Murillo', in *Histoire des peintures de toutes les écoles – Ecole espagnole*, Paris, Jules Renouard, 1869, p. 5.

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Figure 2. Raphael's name inscribed in one of the four corners of the Salon Carré in the Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 3. Rubens's name inscribed in one of the four corners of the Salon Carré in the Musée du Louvre, Paris

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Figure 4. Poussin's name inscribed in one of the four corners of the Salon Carré in the Musée du Louvre, Paris



Figure 5. Murillo's name inscribed in one of the four corners of the Salon Carré in the Musée du Louvre, Paris

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Footnotes

¹ Original text: '[...] *no solo favorecido del cielo por la eminencia de su arte, sino por las dotes de su naturaleza, de buena persona y de amable trato, humilde y modesto*': Palomino, *El museo pictórico y escala óptica*, vol. III: 'El parnaso español pintoresco y laureado', Madrid 1724, see: E. Valdivieso: 'Murillo, Bartolomé Esteban', biography on the Prado website [online](#).

² <http://www.murilloysevilla.org/virgen-de-la-faja/> and Archivo de Protocolos de Sevilla, Oficio 13, 1673, Libro II, f. 680. The spelling is Juan de Federigui or Federighi.

³ 'The picture had been exposed for sale in the open street (*las portales*) opposite the cathedral; the Marquis de Aquila saw it, purchased it instantly, and made it an heirloom.' See E. Davies, *The life of Bartolomé E. Murillo*, London, Bensley and Son, 1819, p. 96.

⁴ L. Kagané, *Bartolomé Esteban Murillo - der spanische Meister des 17. Jahrhunderts*, Parkstone/Aurora-Verlag, Bournemouth/St.Petersburg, 1995, p. 22.

⁵ P. Guinard, *Dauzats et Blanchard. Peintres de l'Espagne romantique*, Paris, Presse Universitaires, 1967, p. 224.

⁶ There are numerous lithographs by Marin Lavigne, Piaud, Geoffroy, Coquardon, J. Prat, L. Maurin, etc.

⁷ <http://www.murilloysevilla.org/virgen-de-la-faja/>; <https://youtu.be/mwJmNraGL-4>