

# Murillo: The Prodigal Son Restored

## Virtual Exhibition

### Leaving Certificate Resource Pack



Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617-1682), *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, 1660s. Photo © National Gallery of Ireland

# Introduction

As galleries and museums across the world have had to close their doors due to the Covid-19 pandemic, many institutions have made their exhibitions available online. This resource will help you to explore the virtual tour of *Murillo: The Prodigal Son Restored*, and consider the advantages and disadvantages of virtual exhibitions.

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## Sample Question from the 2018 Leaving Certificate Art Appreciation Paper

The primary objective in the design of an art gallery, museum or interpretive centre is to create a space for the interaction of people with artworks/artefacts. Discuss this statement with reference to a named art gallery, museum or interpretive centre that you have visited. In your answer describe and discuss two named works and refer to the ways in which the use of the space affected your interaction with these works. Briefly outline your visual concepts for the layout of a school-based exhibition of student art work. Give reasons for your design decisions. Illustrate your answer.

Marking scheme		Marks	Notes
A	Name of gallery, museum or interpretive centre and discussion of statement.	10	5 for name 5 for discussion
B	Describe and discuss two named works and refer to the ways in which the use of space affected your interaction with these works.	15	5 for named works (3/2) 5 for description and discussion of works (3/2) 5 for space and how it affected the interaction
C	Briefly describe and discuss your own ideas for designing a school based exhibition of student art work. Give reasons for your design decisions.	15	
D	Sketches.	10	
<b>Total</b>		<b>50</b>	

**History & Appreciation of Art Paper is worth 150 marks i.e. 37.5% of the total marks for Art**

# About the exhibition

For the first time in decades, see this series of works by one of the most celebrated painters of the Spanish Golden Age, Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682) hanging side by side in the National Gallery of Ireland. Six remarkable paintings depicting the parable of the Prodigal Son have been conserved and researched at the National Gallery of Ireland. Fascinating details uncovered during the conservation project and a number of related prints will be displayed alongside the series, revealing the secrets of the artistic process of this master storyteller.

- \ Generously supported by the Blavatnik Family Foundation
- \ Curators | Muirne Lydon and Dr Aoife Brady

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Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–1682) lived and worked in Seville, Spain, during the **Spanish Golden Age**. This was a time when Spain was very powerful and had colonised much of the Americas. Literature, art and music flourished and Spain's rulers were great patrons of the arts. Other artists from this period include El Greco and Diego Velázquez.

Murillo painted during the **Baroque** era of European art history, in the seventeenth century. This is associated with the Catholic Counter-Reformation, and is characterised by rich, dramatic works; however, there were many different styles across Europe.

The series of paintings is called a **narrative cycle**. They present a unified story over a number of canvases, like an elaborate comic strip. The cycle tells the story of the Prodigal Son from start to finish, across six works. Murillo only painted two narrative cycles in his career, and this is the only one that is still together.

While the story of the **Prodigal Son** is the most frequently illustrated biblical parable in Western art, Murillo's paintings represent the first time a Spanish artist painted the story in serial form. The Gospel account is short and contains minimal descriptive details, providing the artist with creative freedom to develop and embellish the narrative. Murillo set the story in his native Seville, and we can learn a lot about that place and time from looking at the paintings. While there is no record of who the original patrons were, we can guess they were from Seville as the paintings are set there.

Murillo was also inspired by **theatrical sources**. The artist arranged his compositions like a theatre set, each of the six canvases like scenes in a play. Characters are, for the most part, isolated onto singular, shallow planes as though standing on a stage, the backgrounds like backdrops, their gestures extravagant and expressive.

Murillo painted the Prodigal Son series at an established point in his career. From the brushwork we can tell he painted rapidly and skillfully. He painted **alla prima** (all in one go), as there is no evidence of underdrawing. His painting technique is described as **estilo vaporoso** (vaporous style), in which light appears to suffuse the layers of paint, softening the overall composition.

The exhibition is the first time all six paintings have been displayed together in 30 years, and also shows the **conservation process**. The conservation of the works took around six years, and involved detailed and thorough research (find out more: <https://www.youtube.com>).

For example, we know that Murillo mainly used smalt as his blue **pigment**. Smalt is a material made from blue glass, which was ground into a powder. When first applied, smalt would have looked similar in colour to ultramarine, however, it loses its colour over time. The skies in the paintings would originally have been a more intense blue. Murillo used the more expensive ultramarine pigment for the blue robe gifted to the Prodigal Son, in the final painting, emphasising the religious significance of the garment.

# Virtual exhibition

Visit the virtual exhibition: <https://www.nationalgallery.ie>

## Remember:

- ✎ You might not be able to visit an exhibition in person due to social distancing guidelines, or for other reasons. Make it clear in your answer that you have visited a virtual exhibition, and, if possible, compare the experience to other museums or galleries you may have physically visited in the past.
- ✎ You will be required to include sketches in your LC exam, so make lots of annotated sketches alongside your notes.
- ✎ Form your own opinion & give examples - every visitor to the exhibition will have a different experience. We bring our own backgrounds, histories, opinions, and perceptions to viewing works of art. Age, gender, education, nationality, and many other factors, will impact how we perceive an exhibition. Everyone's opinion is equally valid; there is no right or wrong. When answering the Gallery Question it is important to give your own interpretation of the exhibition, but it is equally important to back up your opinions with examples to support your argument.

## First impressions

How easy is it to navigate? What can you see? How is it different to physically being in a gallery?

## Observe & record:

For each element consider how it affects your viewing and interpretation of the paintings.

- ✎ What is the architecture of the gallery? What materials, texture and colours are the walls? Ceilings? Floors? How relevant are these elements if you aren't physically in the space?
- ✎ The hang of the paintings. What height are they hung at? Are they close together or far apart? How are they framed? Is your eye drawn to certain paintings? Can you get a good sense of their size and scale? How relevant is this to a virtual exhibition?

- ✎ The interpretation. Are there text panels? Signage? Labels? Where is the interpretation? What size is it? Colour? Design?
- ✎ The lighting. Is it natural? Artificial? Look up!
- ✎ What is missing from a virtual tour? E.g. fixtures and fittings (furniture, security devices, light switches, etc.), other visitors, staff. How does this affect your experience of the exhibition?

**Sketch:** Create a floorplan and sketch the layout of the exhibition.

## Further activity

How does a virtual tour compare to visiting an exhibition in real life? What are the pros and cons of a virtual tour? List five of each.

You might want to think about:

- ✎ Accessibility - who can visit a virtual exhibition that may not be able to access the physical one? Who is excluded from a virtual exhibition?
- ✎ Experience - how is viewing a painting on a screen different from experiencing it in real life?
- ✎ Cost - how much would it cost to go to the National Gallery of Ireland (including transport, food, drink, etc.)? Would it be possible for you to visit multiple times? What about someone that lives in Donegal, or Paris, for example? Is this a concern for a virtual exhibition?
- ✎ What other pros and cons are there?

# Themes

The curators have explored a number of different themes in the exhibition, including:

- \\ Murillo's life and work
- \\ The biblical parable of the Prodigal Son
- \\ Murillo's interpretation of this story, placing it in contemporary Seville
- \\ The history of how the paintings came into the Gallery's collection, including past owners
- \\ The conservation of the paintings

In your opinion, which of these themes is most interesting? Why?  
Is there anything you would like more information on?  
If you were curating the exhibition, what stories would you tell?

Find out more: <https://www.nationalgallery.ie>

# Sketches

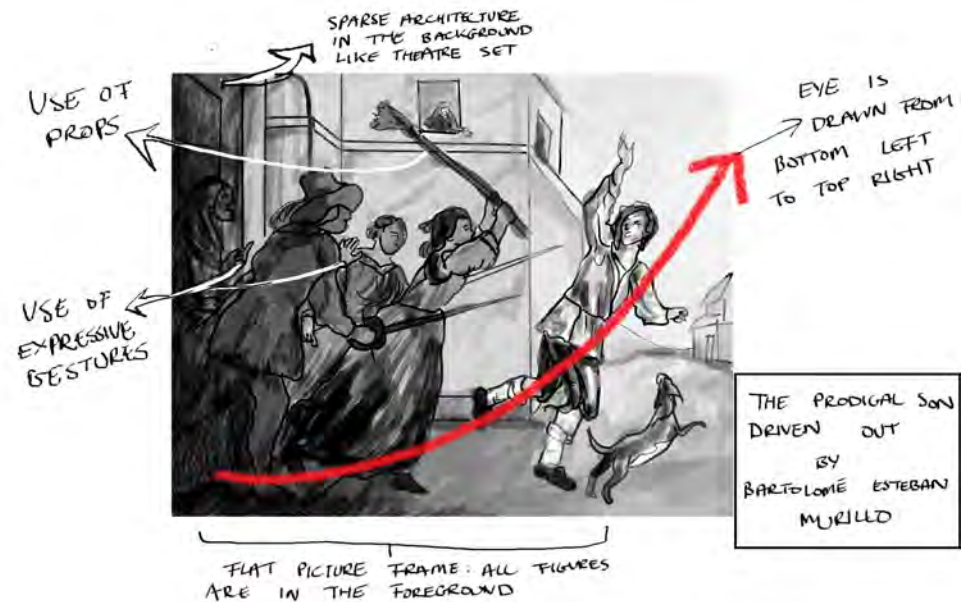
In the LC exam you will be asked to discuss two named works in detail and use sketches to illustrate your answer.

## Note:

- \\ Title of work
- \\ Date
- \\ Materials
- \\ Information included in the label

Practice sketching quickly and coherently - the sketches are worth 10 marks in each question!

Here is an example showing how Murillo was influenced by theatre:



Find out more: Apollo Project's Master Class series with comic book writer-artist Nick Roche on [Instagram](#).

# Interpretation

Exhibition text is skilfully written to convey complex information in a clear and accessible way, within strict word counts. A curator will often do a great deal of contextual research about a work or artist that they then have to condense into a short amount of space. When someone visits an exhibition, they don't want to read a book on a wall! The curator will have to decide what they have to leave out, as much as what they will write. This process can be very difficult, but curators have lots of practice in writing in this particular style. The text will also be proofread by a number of different people who will check for accuracy, clarity and style. The final text that you see in the exhibition will have gone through lots of drafts and edits before it is printed.

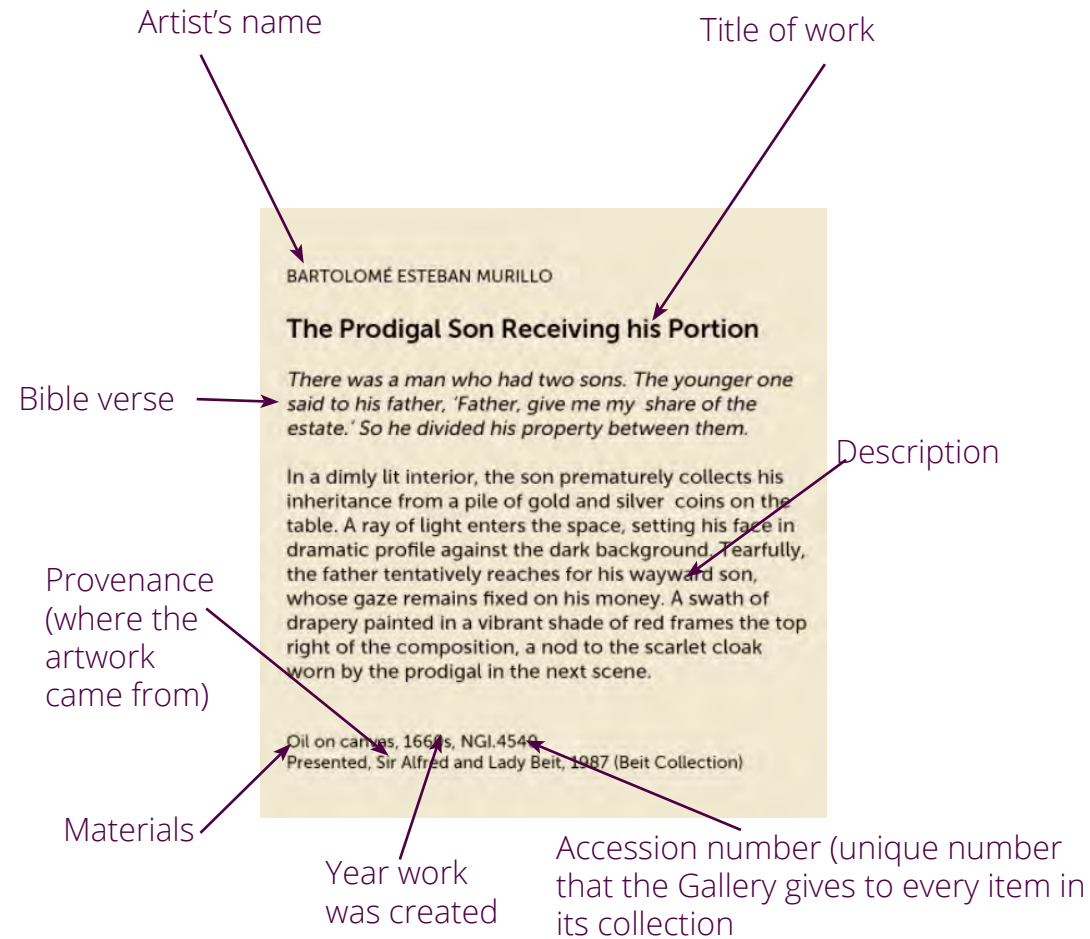
There are different layers to exhibition text. This may include:

- ✓ An introduction panel for the whole exhibition
- ✓ Introduction panels for each room
- ✓ Room titles and years
- ✓ Labels for each artwork
- ✓ Audioguide commentary

## Further activity

Choose one of the paintings from the exhibition and write your own label. Think about:

- ✓ What is the most important piece of information you want to share with the visitor? Put this first.
- ✓ Use active rather than passive language.
- ✓ Don't just describe what's in the painting – include something that the viewer can't see for themselves.
- ✓ Use language a 10 year old would understand – keep it clear, accessible and interesting.
- ✓ Prompt the visitor to look deeper at the painting – you might want to ask a question.
- ✓ Remember to stick to the word count – maximum of 80 words for the description.



Is there anything else you would like to know about the painting?  
Is there any information you don't think should be included? What information do you think is the most important?