

C. Cairns

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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WASHINGTON, January 8: David E. Finley, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today the acquisition for the Nation of one of the most important Spanish paintings to change hands in recent years, Murillo's famous canvas of The Return of the Prodigal Son. The painting is given to the National Gallery by the Avalon Foundation, through the generosity of Mrs. Ailsa Mellon Bruce.

"It is an especially timely gift," Mr. Finley said, "for the National Gallery's collection of Spanish paintings, though very distinguished in quality, is relatively small in number. It contains one other painting by Murillo, A Girl With Her Duenna, from the Widener Collection, which shows the artist at his best as a genre and portrait painter. The new acquisition represents him brilliantly in his better known capacity as a painter of religious subjects. The painting is a large one (7-3/4' x 8-1/2') and, with its harmonious coloring and striking composition, will rank among the Gallery's most important examples from the Baroque period."

In discussing the painting John Walker, Chief Curator of the Gallery, said that The Return of the Prodigal Son belongs to a series of paintings made for the chapel of the Hospital of Saint George, called La Caridad, in Seville. This series has consistently been classed by scholars as Murillo's greatest achievement. "Murillo, who was a member of the brotherhood of La Caridad, devoted himself to the painting of these decorations from 1670 to 1674," Mr. Walker continued. "He executed in all eight compositions for the nave walls and three for the altars. Four of those on the nave walls were among the fifty works by Murillo lost to Spain during the Napoleonic wars. One is now in the Hermitage Gallery, Leningrad; one is in a private collection in Suffolk; and two were in Stafford House, London. The Return of the Prodigal Son was bought by the first Duke of Sutherland from Marshal Soult. It was hung with the splendid collection of art in Stafford House and remained there, except for brief intervals when it was loaned to public exhibitions in London until purchased for the National Gallery of Art."

In 1854 Waagen, the distinguished cataloguer of nineteenth-century British collections, described this painting, which has now come to Washington, as "most impressive for truth and vividness of expression the harmony of colors, the silvery tones, and the perfect rendering of full daylight, place this picture in the highest rank of art."