

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

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NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART AND HERMITAGE MUSEUM AGREE TO ART EXCHANGE Titian's "Saint Sebastian" Arrives from Leningrad for Gorbachev Visit

WASHINGTON, DEC. 6, 1987 - Through an agreement with the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, and the Ministry of Culture, U.S.S.R., Titian's late masterpiece, Saint Sebastian (c. 1575), will go on view in the West Building of the National Gallery of Art beginning Dec. 6, 1987. The National Gallery of Art will loan El Greco's Laocoön (c. 1610) to the Hermitage in 1989 in honor of the Hermitage's 225th anniversary. Both works will be on view at the National Gallery during the upcoming summit meetings between the United States and the Soviet Union. Titian's Saint Sebastian will remain at the National Gallery through early 1988.

J. Carter Brown, director of the National Gallery of Art, said: "The National Gallery of Art and the Hermitage and Pushkin museums undertook a major exchange of works of art in 1986 as a result of the cultural agreement signed at the summit meeting in Geneva. At that time we joined with our Soviet colleagues in expressing hope that exchanges of art between the United States and the Soviet Union would continue. The arrival of Titian's great masterpiece, Saint Sebastian, on the eve of General Secretary and Mrs. Gorbachev's visit to America indicates that the desire for greater cultural ties between our two nations is being realized."

(more)

Titian (c. 1488-1576) dominated Venetian art during the 16th century and was one of the longest-lived and most prolific European artists in history. His renown was greater than that of any other artist of his time, including Michelangelo.

The Saint Sebastian, left in Titian's studio at his death, is typical of his last works, where vibrant color and gestural brushwork are combined with expressive force. The effect of the dense and dramatic color, together with the richness of the painted surface, generates a sense of visual and tactile beauty independent of any subject matter. However, the subject of Saint Sebastian is not incidental to Titian's meaning. Titian used the theme of the saint's martyrdom to make a statement about the dignity of humankind and its capacity to endure suffering.

Saint Sebastian was one of the most popular subjects in Renaissance art. Artists who wanted to portray a majestic male nude could do so in this theme under the veil of Christian propriety. The traditional story of Saint Sebastian appears to be a romantic invention. He was supposed to have been an imperial guard in Rome under Diocletian, who, upon discovering that Sebastian was a Christian, sentenced him to be shot to death with arrows. Titian's Saint Sebastian differs from other depictions of the saint by the degree to which the artist has made the ideal beauty of a classical nude secondary to a profound emotional and spiritual meaning in the subject.

Since it was acquired by the Hermitage in 1850, the painting has been shown in the West only once, at the 1935 Titian exhibition in Venice. It is today recognized as one of the artist's greatest achievements.

Among the works of the Spanish artist El Greco (1541-1614), the National Gallery's Laocoön stands as one of the artist's most spectacular late works. Like the Titian, it touches on the theme of human suffering. It also is the Spanish artist's only attempt to represent a mythological subject from his own Greek heritage.

According to legend, Laocoön, a priest at Troy, incurred the wrath of Apollo by desecrating Apollo's temple and by violating a prohibition against marriage and fathering children. During the last year of the Trojan War, he was chosen by the Trojans to offer a sacrifice to appease the god Poseidon. While Laocoön was making the offering, a great wooden horse was discovered on the beach before Troy. Believing the horse to be a gift from Athena, the Trojans prepared to take it inside the walls of the city.

Laocoön hurled his spear into the horse's side declaring he did not trust the Greeks. As the Trojans hesitated, two great serpents sent by Apollo to punish Laocoön for his offenses came out of the sea and attacked him and his two sons, killing them all. The Trojans concluded that Laocoön had been punished for doubting the worthiness of Athena's gift and for casting his spear into its flank. They resolved to take the horse through the gates of the city, an act that admitted the Greeks and led to the downfall of the Trojans.

Titian's Saint Sebastian and El Greco's Laocoön are both late masterpieces of the respective artists and both were probably done by the artists for their own pleasure, not on commission. The exchange is appropriate for another reason: El Greco's composition is based on a lost painting by Titian of the Laocoön, which was painted for the Este family around 1540.