

A dinner party conversation led to Florence masterpieces being shown at Belen art gallery

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Federico Gandolfi Vannini and his wife Daisy Beatriz Díaz were out to dinner in Coral Gables one evening with the president of Belen, where their two sons attend, and the conversation turned to art.

Vannini, who happens to be a fourth-generation art dealer from Florence who moved to Miami with his family during the pandemic, showed Father Guillermo García-Tuñón one of his paintings. Some small talk and a few glasses of wine later, the idea to bring a classical art exhibition to Belen Jesuit Preparatory School in west Miami-Dade was born.

Just 10 months later, Vannini and Diaz stood in Belen's art gallery and watched as Renaissance paintings shipped from their gallery in Florence were uncrated for the upcoming show. The exhibition, titled "[Faith, Beauty, and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque Paintings](#)," opens Saturday and will

feature 30 paintings and other rare artifacts by Italian and Flemish masters from three significant periods in art history.



Miami, Florida, Sept. 5, 2023 - Daisy Beatriz Díaz, left, and Federico Gandolfi Vannini, right, at the Olga M. & Carlos A. Saladrigas Art Gallery at Belen Jesuit

Preparatory School. The couple brought paintings from their Florence, Italy, gallery to be showcased at Belen in an exhibit, 'Faith, Beauty, and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque Paintings.'

"It's an opportunity to expose the kids and the South Florida community to works of art that unfortunately we have very little access to," García-Tuñón said.

Rubens, Caravaggio works

Many of the centuries-old paintings, which include religious classics from world-famous masters including Flemish Baroque artist Peter Paul Rubens and Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio, have not been seen before in the United States — let alone in Miami.

"Most of them have never crossed the ocean," said Diaz, who's a Miami native of Cuban heritage and the cultural director of Frascione Arte, the family's Florentine gallery. "These are absolutely rare treasures ... just a little slice of Florence and we're bringing it to south Miami."

The exhibition, which runs through Dec. 16, is a unique get for Miami's art scene, known for its contemporary and Latin American art. Old Master paintings, which refer to works by eminent European artists before 1800, are rare on their own, but having them together in one exhibit is special, said Sylvie

Daubar-San Juan, director of the Olga M. & Carlos A. Saladrigas Art Gallery at Belen.

“This is very exciting,” Daubar-San Juan said at Tuesday’s uncrating event in the school’s gallery. “Because we have artwork here from the Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque periods, seeing them all together, it allows the audience to see the transition that happens stylistically.”

Daubar-San Juan said the audience will be able to track the stylistic changes from each period, learning the history as they go.

“In the Middle Ages, the main purpose of art in Europe was spirituality. That’s why artists were not so concerned about depicting figures in a realistic manner,” she said.

The Renaissance period was still very religious, but the figures were shown more realistically. The halos, for example, were not as bright, Daubar-San Juan said.



Belen Jesuit students visit the art exhibition, 'Faith, Beauty, and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque Paintings' housed in the Olga M. & Carlos A. Saladrigas Art Gallery at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. Sylvie Daubar-San Juan, humanities department chairperson and the school's gallery director, speaks to the students about the paintings.

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Many of the paintings depict iconic religious imagery during a time when the Catholic Church embraced the visual arts.

“In the Baroque Period, the Catholic Church used the art to bring people back to the church in a way that was very dramatic and theatrical and really drew in the viewer,” Daubar-San Juan said. “It was a way for people to understand the religion and become more spiritually involved.”

Painting from the 13th century

The oldest painting in the exhibit, “Painted Cross,” dates to 1295 by an unknown master artist in the Italian region of Umbria and is the earliest surviving crucifix painting to be exhibited in the United States. The painting, which depicts St. Francis and St. Clare, both of Assisi, alongside Jesus’ body, was considered ahead of its time. The artist used spacial techniques without having the basic mathematical knowledge of perspective, developed 100 years later during the Renaissance.

García-Tuñón, whom students and staff warmly refer to as “Father Willie,” jumped at the opportunity to bring the classical art to Belen Jesuit students and the South Florida community. He said the exhibition was a perfect fit to showcase at a faith-based school.

“What I find extraordinary about art, is that you’re dealing with individuals who share one of God’s greatest attributes, which is creator,” García-Tuñón said. “The Jesuits preach continuously how every aspect of life, whether it’s art or sport or technology or science, you can clearly experience the presence of God.”



Miami, Florida, Sept. 5, 2023 - A team from Betsy Frank Gallery prepares to hang a painting titled, 'Portrait of Pier Soderini,' circa 1515 by Ridolfo del Ghirlandaio, on the walls of the gallery at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. The work is part of an exhibit, 'Faith, Beauty and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque Paintings,' which opens Saturday, Sept. 16, 2023, and runs through Dec. 16, 2023.

Vannini, whose gallery lent the paintings to Belen for the exhibition, initially planned to be a lawyer, but after traveling around Europe at 19 and buying antiques from flea markets, he gained a passion for collecting art and changed his career path. He believes the transcendence of creating and viewing art can be a religious experience in itself.

“[This exhibition] gives back to the painting the role of faith. It’s completely detached now,” Vannini said. “It’s a creation of beauty by humans. That’s why this kind of art started, to get closer to God.”

WHAT: “Faith, Beauty, and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque Paintings”

WHERE: Olga M. & Carlos A. Saladrigas Art Gallery at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School, 500 SW 127 Ave., Miami, FL 33184

WHEN: Open to the public on Saturday, Sept. 16. Visits available through Dec. 16, 2023, [by appointment](#).

COST: Free

The Miami Herald is one of the media sponsors of the exhibit.

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Belen Jesuit students study the painting, 'Act of Devotion by Rudolf I of Habsburg,' by Peter Paul Rubens, circa 1616, at the 'Faith, Beauty, and Devotion: Medieval, Renaissance, and Baroque Paintings' exhibition housed in the Olga M. & Carlos A. Saladrigas Art Gallery at Belen Jesuit Preparatory School. The exhibit opens Saturday, Sept. 16, 2023, to the public and runs through Dec. 16, 2023.