

# A Matter of Style: The Holy Family

European Art  
1600-1700

In *The Holy Family with Saint Mary Magdalene*, the artist El Greco featured the red-cloaked saint in the intimate triangular composition created by the infant Jesus, the Virgin Mary, and Saint Joseph, Mary's husband. El Greco painted serene figures dressed in vibrant primary colors—in dramatic contrast to the swirling atmospheric intensity around them. The relationship between Mary and Jesus is the main focus; El Greco placed them in the center of the canvas with Mary's blue cloak and arm protectively encircling her child. The artist's choice to highlight these figures by using the lightest pigments on their clothing and skin, as well as placing them in an ambiguous setting, further draws attention to them.

Francisco de Zurbarán chose to reinforce the maternal relationship between Mary and Jesus in a distinctly different manner in *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*. Instead of the moody location chosen by El Greco, Zurbarán used an interior where every object speaks directly to the life and eventual death of Christ. Zurbarán also showed a moment when the figures, although physically engaged in their own quiet pursuits, are emotionally connected through Mary's sorrowful gaze. Zurbarán's ability to depict domestic items as well as the cherubs filtering through the ethereal light in the upper left showcases his versatility and technical mastery.

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left: El Greco [Doménicos Theotokópoulos] (Greek, active in Spain, 1541–1614). *The Holy Family with Mary Magdalene*, about 1590–95. Oil on canvas; 63 x 51 9/16 in. Gift of Friends of the Cleveland Museum of Art in memory of J. H. Wade 1926.247



right: Francisco de Zurbarán (Spanish, 1598–1664). *Christ and the Virgin in the House of Nazareth*, about 1640. Oil on canvas; 79 3/16 x 100 13/16 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1960.117

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Nicolas Poussin (French, 1594–1665). *The Holy Family on the Steps*, about 1648. Oil on canvas; 40 3/4 x 53 1/4 in. Leonard C. Hanna Jr. Fund 1981.18



*(CONTINUED FROM FRONT)* In *The Holy Family on the Steps*, Nicolas Poussin substituted the emotional approach of the preceding artists with a restrained examination of the Holy Family. Poussin's painting features the Holy Family, but also includes Saint John the Baptist and Saint John's mother, Saint Elizabeth, set within a classically inspired architectural space. These architectural elements both direct the viewer's eye to the figures and establish the singular importance of Christ, who is framed between two pillars. Although this painting recalls the pyramid form created by El Greco, the limited interaction among the five figures undermines the familial intimacy. Instead, Poussin focused on the precise, measured architecture, placid surface, and seamless recession into space.

Although each of these artists dealt with the same theme, their individual skills and ideas, as well as the expectations of their patrons and religious leaders, informed their stylistic decisions. Ultimately these choices provide the thematic and stylistic variety that defines the art of the 1600s.