



Blind Old Beggar, c. 1632

Jusepe de Ribera (Spanish, 1591-1653)

Oil on canvas | 49 x 40 1/16 in. (124.5 x 101.7 cm)

- Who do you think these people are judging by their clothing and expression?
- What could be the relationship between the two figures? What visual clues suggest this?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

Jusepe de Ribera's *Blind Old Beggar* was painted in the early 1630s, most likely around 1632. The work depicts an elderly man standing with his hand on the shoulder of a young boy who sits and gazes directly at the viewer, perhaps imploring us to stop and pay attention to their plight. The two wear simple clothing, the boy's slightly torn and ragged. The old man's eyes are closed, his face drawn and haggard, and he holds

out a cup on which a piece of paper is inscribed: "Dies Illa, Dies Illa." Indeed, the man's eyes are so heavy, they seem never to have been open. Additionally, he has clearly turned his head upward, toward some sort of illumination but his eyes suggest that he is only able to feel the warmth from the light.

The figures are set against a simple black background, devoid of any objects or landscape to situate them in a specific time or place. The absence of any other figure, object, or clue as to the setting of the work serves to make the figures themselves more significant, even monumental.

Ribera painted this work with a strong diagonal composition, from the boy's crossed hands in the lower right, upward through the hand of the man, and equally through the cup and his face. A source of strong lighting from the upper left continues to draw the viewer's gaze along the diagonal.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

This scene uses the artistic device of a dramatic *chiaroscuro* reminiscent of the Baroque master Caravaggio, who exerted much influence over the painting style of artists working after the turn of the 17th century. The lighting here is quite extreme, with the figures mostly cast in darkness and shadow except for their faces, which are bathed and accentuated in light. Ribera paints in a realistic manner that conveys the poverty and sincerity of his subjects, and thus affirms his belief in producing truthful representations of the world. His use of earthy, neutral colors gives a generally somber tone to the picture, implying the gravity and seriousness of the characters' situation. Ribera worked directly on his canvases, applying and overlapping new layers of paint before the layers underneath had dried.

Ribera has crafted a composition that continuously reinforces the theme of

- What other visual cues does Ribera use to guide the viewer’s eye, and reinforce his thematic message?
- What is the Last Judgment? Why would it have been important for the Catholic Church to focus on salvation during this time?

charity to the poor. In addition to the depiction of the figures themselves, he prominently displays the phrase, “Dies Illa, Dies Illa.” This is a reference to a portion of the Requiem Mass that announces the coming Last Judgment: “Dies Irae, Dies Illa,” which translates as “Day of Wrath, That Day.” By invoking these words, Ribera reminds the viewer of the deliberations of Judgment Day. Also, the key the old man wears around his neck is visible hanging just to the left of the boy’s shoulder. Ribera has taken care to highlight the reflections of light off the key, to draw attention to it. Most scholars believe this to be a reference to the keys to Heaven.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

As a devout Catholic, Ribera’s beliefs are a large part of what motivates *Blind Old Beggar*. His relation of spiritual judgment to charitable acts echoes prevailing Counter-Reformation theology of the time period—in response to Protestant doctrines like *predestination*, the Catholic Church insisted upon the necessity of good works to achieve *salvation*.

The painting also alludes to the popular Spanish *picaresque* novel *Lazarillo de*

Tormes, published in 1554. The word *lazarillo* was a common term for “beggar boy” in Spanish-speaking countries, and would have been familiar to Ribera’s audience. The book was widely known, and the viewer would have instantly identified the old blind man and his young companion, perhaps in the same way that we might recognize an allusion to Huckleberry Finn. *Lazarillo de Tormes* chronicles a cruel, old blind man and his beggar boy, who often had to outwit his master in order to get enough food to live. However, nothing in the painting directly references or illustrates the story itself; instead, the moral significance and humanity of charity and alms giving are expounded upon by the artist’s decision to portray the two in the act of begging.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Jusepe de Ribera was born and baptized in 1591 in a small Spanish town near Valencia. His father was a shoemaker and his mother died during his early childhood. Little has been established about Ribera’s early life in Spain. An early biographer of Ribera has suggested that he had an apprenticeship with the painter Francisco Ribalta in Valencia, but there is little evidence to support this.

VOCABULARY

Chiaroscuro: In painting, the use of deep variations and subtle gradations of light and shade, especially to enhance the delineation of character and for general dramatic effect.

Picaresque: Pertaining to, characteristic of, or characterized by a form of prose fiction originally developed in Spain, in which the adventures of an engaging hero are described in a series of usually humorous or satiric episodes that often depict, in realistic detail, the everyday life of common people.

Predestination: The doctrine that God has decided all things in advance, especially that certain souls have already been elected to eternal salvation.

Salvation: The act of saving or protecting from harm; in Christianity, deliverance from the power and penalty of sin; redemption.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Communications: Oral and Visual; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Literary Text; Research
- **Mathematics:** Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes; Measurement
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** Economics; Geography; History; People in Societies; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Analyzing and Responding; Connections, Relationships, and Applications; Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection

At some point, Ribera traveled to Italy, where he spent at least three years in Rome. Here he spent his money carelessly, lived constantly in debt, and was described as eccentric, yet shrewd. He often promised paintings as payments for bills, but he rarely came through. As Europe's most thriving cultural center, Rome provided Ribera with the opportunity to see the great masters of the Italian Renaissance. He was particularly drawn to Raphael and works from classical antiquity, but it was Caravaggio who would have the most influence on Ribera's early work. In Italy, he became acquainted with Caravaggio's followers, including Hendrick ter Brugghen (also represented in the AMAM collection).

In 1616, Ribera joined the Academy in Rome, and later that year moved to

Naples and married Catarina Azzolino, the daughter of a Sicilian sculptor. He soon began to receive large commissions, and through his wife came into some property, thus establishing himself as a family man and powerful figure in the art world. Around this time, he began signing his work "Jusepe de Ribera, español", which can just be seen in the lower left corner of this painting. He soon earned the nickname "Lo Spagnoletto" or "Little Spaniard."

Ribera died in 1653 after a long illness that left him nearly incapacitated. Only four years later, the city of Naples was ravaged by plague, bringing to a close the golden age that had epitomized his artistic achievements.

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: *Blind Old Beggar* is based on a very popular book that most people would have known at the time. What are some books that you think everyone knows today? Choose one and draw a picture that somehow illustrates it in a way that would make your audience realize right away what book you are referring to. (*Elementary and Middle School*)

SCIENCE: It is often said that Ribera was trying to achieve a higher truth in his paintings, honestly representing what was in front of him and capturing a sense of spirituality.

Skim through an anatomy textbook, and then closely examine Ribera's work here, or from other sources. How accurately and realistically constructed were Ribera's figures compared to actual anatomy? What are the most complicated parts of human bodies—and the most complicated to paint or draw? (*Middle and High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Ribera's painting is a depiction of the lower classes in Spanish society. What would the upper classes, or aristocrats, have looked like? What kinds of clothes did they wear, what did their homes look like? Find paintings by Spanish artists of the same period, such as Velázquez, that depict these upper class citizens, and compare them with Ribera's painting. (*All Ages*)

Research the political situation in Italy in the first half of the 1600s. What was happening in the city of Naples specifically? In small groups, discuss how the political situation affected artists and the work they produced? (*Middle and High School*)