



Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Joseph*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 71.8 x 61.9 cm, Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

Jusepe de Ribera (1591–1652) was a Spanish painter active in Spain and Italy during the early seventeenth century. *Saint Joseph*, executed in oil on canvas around 1635, shows the figure of Saint Joseph holding a flowered staff against a dark background. Ribera's use of *chiaroscuro*—an artistic technique that showcases a sharp contrast between light and dark—is outstanding;

only Joseph's face and hand, as well as the white lilies on his staff, are visible. The light coming from an unseen source in the upper left corner illuminates Joseph's face, hair and hand. This style of painting, known as tenebrism, heightens the emotional nature of the scene, thus bringing together the emotional character of Spanish art of the Baroque period and the dramatic representations by Caravaggio (1571–1610) and his followers in Italy. The artist combines a depiction of a Christian saint with the conviction of a portrait. Ribera pays great attention to details, such as the wrinkles on Joseph's forehead and around his eyes, the locks of grey hair and the hair on the saint's beard. Such naturalism makes the image all the more compelling. The *chiaroscuro* effect also hints at the divine nature of the subject matter. Here, Ribera depicts the apocryphal story described in the Proto-Gospel of James in which Joseph discovers, through the flowering of his staff, that he has been chosen to be Mary's husband. This is an unusual scene since Joseph is almost always accompanied by either the Virgin Mary or the Christ Child.

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