

***Jacob Laying the Peeled Rods Before the Flocks of Laban***  
**Bartolomé Esteban Murillo, Spanish, 1617-1682**  
**1665-70, Oil on canvas, 87 3/4 x 142 1/2 inches**  
**The Aljur H. Meadows Collection, Meadows Museum, Southern Methodist**  
**University, Dallas, Texas**

### **About the Artist**

Murillo spent most of his life in Seville, Spain, the town in which he had been born. He was orphaned in 1628, and his uncle put him in the studio of a relative who was a painter. He stayed there until 1639, painted for local fairs, and made small religious paintings that dealers sent to be sold in the Americas. In 1642, he met an artist who had studied with a Northern European painter, and this artist showed him Flemish prints and copies of paintings done in the north. In 1645, he was married, and we know that five of his eight children entered the Church.

Art history tells us that in 1645 or 1646 Murillo received his first major commission from the Franciscans in Seville. This commission began his successful career, and we are told that he painted eleven pictures for this religious group. After producing these works, he did many more paintings and became quite popular. In 1660, he founded the Academy of Arts, a school for artists, in Seville, and was one of the teachers there.

### **About the Art**

This painting is a landscape that contains figures and animals that tell a story (see the story on the back of the Artlinks print).

*Jacob Laying the Rods Before the Sheep of Laban* is the fourth in a series of five paintings that tell the story about Jacob from Genesis, the first book of the Bible. Two other paintings that tell other parts of the story are in the Hermitage in Leningrad, Russia. The titles of these two are: *Jacob's Dream* and *Jacob Receiving the Blessing of Isaac*. Another painting from the series is *Laban Searching for his Household Gods in Jacob's Hut*, and it is in the Cleveland Museum of Art, in Cleveland, Ohio. The whereabouts of the fifth painting, actually the third in the series of five, *The Meeting of Jacob and Rachel*, was unknown until quite recently when the National Gallery of Ireland acquired a painting believed to be the missing work. Records exist of the sale of this painting in 1817 by art dealer Alexis Delahante, but nothing is known about its provenance (the history of the ownership of the work) from that time until its recent discovery in Dublin.

### **Additional Information**

This painting is one of a series of five done about the life of Jacob. The story is told in Genesis 30, verses 37 to 39. In the foreground, Jacob, the main human figure, is laying rods, or branches, in the stream. Murillo painted a large rock with bushes growing on it directly behind Jacob in the center of the work. On the right side of the canvas, an old horse is tied to a tree and shepherds are guiding sheep to the stream. On the left side of

the painting, in the foreground, sheep are gathered at the edge of the stream, and a shepherd's hut can be seen farther back in the middle-ground of the painting.

In the right middle-ground, the viewer sees a rather broken-down bridge. The background is the deepest space, nearest the horizon, and there the artist has placed hazy rock formations, some bushes and trees, and what appears to be a cluster of buildings. *Jacob Laying the Peeled Rods Before the Flocks of Laban* is a good example of one way that artists are able to show three-dimensional space on a flat surface, a canvas or a piece of paper.

By using atmospheric perspective, Murillo has presented a very deep view into the distance. The people, animals, and objects in the foreground are much stronger colors, more detailed, larger, and much sharper in focus than those in the middle- or background. In the painting, the things that are the farthest away are the most hazy or unfocused, the same way that the human eye sees objects in the distance. In this painting, Murillo has used a foreground, a middle-ground, and a background and has made changes in how people and objects are presented from one space to the next.

### **About the Time and Place**

Art historians believe that Murillo worked on this painting between the years 1665 and 1670. In the year 1665, Spain's King Philip IV died and his 4 year-old son, Don Carlos, became ruler. In the New World, the New Jersey colony was founded by English colonists who made Elizabethtown their capital.

During the years between 1665 and 1670, several important mathematic and scientific discoveries were made. Calculus was discovered, perhaps we should say invented, by Isaac Newton, a 23 year-old Cambridge University mathematics professor. He also defined the laws of gravity after observing an apple fall in an orchard. He calculated that the attraction between the apple and the ground when one foot apart is 100 times stronger than when they are 10 feet apart. A variety of apple, the Newton pippin, was named in honor of the apple that inspired his discovery. Newton also measured the moon's orbit during this period and developed a reflecting telescope.

John Milton's *Paradise Lost* was printed during this period and sold 1,300 copies in 18 months. Because he had been blind since 1652, he had dictated the entire 10-volume work to his daughters.

Rembrandt van Rijn painted his last Self-Portrait, one of many that span his lifetime, before he died in Amsterdam on October 4, 1669, at the age of 63.