

What Gold?

By: Valerie Hegstrom

Sixteenth-century Spain politically and militarily dominated the world. The Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (Charles I of Spain) and his son Philip II governed vast territories “on which the sun never set” in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. The Spanish Armada, which defeated the Turks in the famous Battle of Lepanto (1571), meant that Spain ruled the seas. The “Reconquest” completed in Granada by Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492 and the conquest of the Americas carried out thereafter contributed large quantities of gold to Spanish coffers. By the seventeenth century, however, following the several expulsions of Jewish and Moorish citizens, and as the empire suffered from wars, rebellions, famines, plagues, pestilence, oppressive debts, and inflation, the gold began to run out. Indeed, the Spanish government had to declare bankruptcy several times during the 1600s. In 1588, pride, seasickness, a storm, and bad luck conspired against the “Invincible” *Armada*, so Elizabeth’s little island with no standing army defeated the world’s greatest military aggressor.

The Golden Age or *Siglo de oro* in Spain very loosely refers to both the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but courses on the period focus more specifically on the 1580s—1670s. During that Golden Century, while the political, military, and economic importance of the Spanish empire declined, Spanish arts flourished. El Greco produced his masterpieces in the 1580s and then Velázquez (*Las meninas*, *Las hilanderas*), Ribera, Zurbarán, and Murillo dominated the 1600s. Cervantes published the first and greatest of all novels: Part I of *Don Quijote* in 1605, followed by the second part in 1615. Other great novelists, Quevedo, Mateo Alemán, and María de Zayas, produced best-sellers, later translated into other languages. Góngora wrote many of his best-loved poems in the 80s; Quevedo and Lope mocked his *culternista* style with their *conceptista* poems in the early 1600s.

Arguably the greatest manifestation of this cultural flourishing occurred in the theater. Madrid constructed its first two permanent public playhouses in 1579 and 1582. These *corrales de comedias* and the thirst of Spanish people (from the nobles to the clergy to the lower classes) for the entertainment of the *comedias* staged therein, led to the writing and production of thousands of Golden Age plays, many of them masterpieces of the stage. Lope de Vega, the “father” of Spanish National Theater and the man whom Cervantes called a “monster of nature,” penned at least 800 plays himself. Many great playwrights and disciples belong to “Lope’s school”: Tirsa de Molina, Mira de Amescua, Ruiz de Alarcón, Vélez de Guevara, etc. The dramatist who most clearly moved beyond Lope’s influence and carefully crafted some of the greatest plays ever written was Pedro de Calderón de la Barca, author of *La vida es sueño* (Life Is a Dream—1635) and *La dama duende* (The Phantom Lady—1629). The age was golden because of its artists; its treasures were its paintings, novels, poetry, and plays.