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## Who's That Girl? – The Duchess of Alba

Presented by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Can you ever truly understand an artist's mind or inspiration for bringing brush to canvas?

For more than two centuries, there has been speculation about a circumspect relationship between a beautiful aristocrat and legendary artist Francisco Goya (1746-1828). María del Pilar Teresa Cayetana de Silva Álvarez de Toledo y Silva, the Thirteenth Duchess of Alba, was the glamorous wife of the Duke of Alba. Together, they were the wealthiest couple in Spain.

By the time the Duke and Duchess had become two of Goya's most important patrons, the artist had already garnered attention as Europe's premiere royal portraitist. The Duchess was the subject of several of his paintings, but Goya's most famous depiction—a full-length portrait from the Hispanic Society of America in New York—is on loan to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), in the special exhibition, *Goya: Order and Disorder*. Dressed in native Spanish attire, she dominates the

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arid landscape with her proud stance and forthright stare. But does the painting suggest more than meets the eye?

The artist stokes innuendo by signing the painting with “Solo Goya” written in the sand, with the Duchess pointing to the scrolling words. Does “Solo Goya” reflect the artist’s bravado, that he was the only one who could have executed such an ambitious portrait? Or does it reveal that Goya was the only one for the Duchess? Adding to the intrigue, the rings on her right hand are engraved with the names “Goya” and “Alba,” combining the two for eternity.

Although rumors started as far back as the early 19th century, there’s no solid evidence to suggest this forbidden love. Experts actually dispute this notion, noting that her gold rings were added to the picture later, probably in the mid-19th century. Although Goya and the Duchess were close personal friends, their social circles were quite different. Those boundaries shouldn’t be denied—she was high society and he was a painter, so the coupling would have been unlikely.

According to Stephanie Stepanek, the MFA’s exhibition co-curator, “Goya may have had a crush on her. That’s all we know. The rest is legend.”

Regardless of its shroud of mystery, *The Duchess of Alba* is not to be missed. The artist earned widespread fame through grand portraits such as these, and *Goya: Order and Disorder* marks just the third time in a century that the painting has left New York, and probably the first time she has hung side-by-side with the full-length portrait of her husband, the Duke of Alba. Was Goya’s portrait of the Duchess created for love or was it just another aristocratic commission?

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