

An abstract painting featuring vibrant, layered colors including blue, yellow, red, and white. The brushstrokes are expressive and textured, creating a sense of depth and movement. The colors are applied in various directions, some overlapping and some more distinct.

Contemporary Discussions In Art History

Sociohistorical
And
Psychological
Observations

Bruna Bejarano

 EDITORA
ARTEMIS
2020



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PRESENTATION

Art History is a vast field of study which, loosely explained, deals with the effort to understand how, historically, different groups and people represented their artistic talents. Philosophical and religious beliefs, economic conditions, psychological constructions — all the elements that play a role in the development of human beings — influence stylistic choices of artists, whether they are manifested in painting, sculpture, ceramics, architecture, or any other form of artistic efforts. An interdisciplinary field *par excellence*, Art History looks at art from a holistic perspective, trying to understand artistic manifestations in their relation to the time periods and social context in which they are produced. Cultural influences — such as religion, social arrangements, institutions and gender constructions — all have a direct impact on every human intellectual manifestation, including the arts.

This book, entitled “**Contemporary discussions in Art History: sociohistorical and psychological observations**” is a collection of six articles that point to some ways in which specific art works are either (or both) a revelation of a sociohistorical moment or a subversive attempt to transform their context by denouncing operating power structures. In one way or another, all artists studied in this book used their craft to affirm what they perceive as an agenda worth advancing.

I hope you enjoy reading it!

Bruna Bejarano

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CHAPTER 6

LAS MENINAS

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ABSTRACT: Celebrated as Diego Velázquez's masterpiece and one of the most important artworks in Western art history, *Las Meninas* is a huge oil on canvas that has been part of the Museo del Prado (Madrid) art collection since its foundation, in 1819. Throughout the past three centuries, dozens of interpretations of *Las Meninas* have been offered by art historians. While some have assumed that the painting is a literal representation of the Royal family – a genre scene of court life, with the king and queen reflected in the mirror behind Velázquez, others have contended that the painting is a representation of a classical representation: a painting about painting, raising ambiguity about the point of view of the artist and of possible onlookers. The following article explores the painting, including a brief analysis of its historical context and a review of scholars Jonathan Brown and Simon Altman's research on the subject.

KEYWORDS: Las Meninas; Velázquez; Art of Spain.

1. INTRODUCTION

Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660) was one of the most important

Spanish painters and a favorite of King Phillip IV of Spain. He lived in the period known as the "Spanish Golden Age" (*El Siglo de Oro*, circa 1560-1660), in which artistic and literary activity flourished: Miguel de Cervantes wrote *Don Quixote*; painters as El Greco, Francisco de Zurbarán, Bartolomé Murillo (and Velázquez himself) produced masterpieces; and Tirso de Molina created *Don Juan*, the legendary character from his play *The Trickster of Seville and the Stone Guest*.

Spanish art was then marked by a strong religious influence, encouraged by patronage of the Catholic monarchs and the spirit of the Counter-Reformation. An apprentice of Francisco Pacheco (whose daughter the Sevillian artist would later marry), Velázquez was introduced to King Phillip IV and became one of his court painters. His early works, as those of his father-in-law, were of religious themes, but he was later influenced by Italian painter Caravaggio.

Under the patronage of the King, he enjoyed the benefits of a good salary and was commissioned less than his counterparts for religious painting, dedicating most of his talent to portraits of the royal family. Still, he painted members of the inner papal court, and during a

visit to Italy, between 1649 and 1651, painted a portrait of Pope Innocent X himself:



Figure 1. *Portrait of Pope Innocent X, ca. 1650.*

Velázquez also demonstrated his realistic style and unparalleled psychological insight painting *hidalgos*¹, such as poet Francisco Quevedo, and common people.

2. HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Power struggles between Church and state were common in medieval Europe and continued well until the end of the Middle Ages, when a fragile equilibrium was established in the form of several alliances between the European Monarchs and the Church. The Inquisition, for example, which had been an exclusively papal affair, became a state enterprise in 1478, when Pope Sixtus IV (1414-1484) was pressured into issuing the papal bull *Exigit sinceras devotionis affectus* (*Sincere Devotion Is Required*), authorizing the creation of the Inquisition in Castile.

Two episodes help illustrate the shift in the balance of power during the transition from medieval to modern age: In 1076, Henry IV, Emperor of Germany, entered into

1. Hidalgo: a member of the Spanish or Portuguese nobility.

the Investiture Controversy (concerning the question of who should appoint local church officials) with Pope Gregory VII. In retaliation, the Pope excommunicated the king and signed an interdict releasing his vassals of their feudal obligations. To save his throne, the Emperor was forced to make a humiliating pilgrimage to the city of Canossa to ask the Pope for forgiveness.

On the other hand, in 1301, Philip IV (Phillip the Fair), king of France, came into a conflict with Pope Boniface VIII, who constantly interfered in “temporal” affairs. Phillip succeeded in barring the clergy from the administration of the law and imposing taxes on them. This time, the monarch won the battle and, in 1303, ordered the Supreme Pontiff to be arrested. Under Phillip IV’s influence, the papacy was transferred from Rome to Avignon, France.

The 1600s in Europe started with food shortages resulting from harvest failures due to prolonged periods of exceptionally difficult weather. During the previous century, Spain had lost nearly half a million inhabitants, and prophecies about the end of the world proliferated. To make matters worse, the Thirty Years’ War (1618-1648), initially a religious conflict between Catholic and Protestant states, developed into one of the most destructive wars in human history, resulting in around 8 million fatalities, mostly in the Holy Roman Empire (Western and Central Europe, its final dissolution only happened in 1806, during the Napoleonic Wars). The Peace of Westphalia (1648) ended the religious wars and recognized secular kingship as a legitimate and dominant form of government – marking the beginning of the modern international system of sovereign states.

Spain, under the reign of Catholic monarchs and away from the epicenter of the religious conflicts, enjoyed a period of relative prosperity and great colonial expansion under the Habsburg dynasty (1516-1700), but by the time of Philip IV the influence of the empire was in decline. On the other hand, despite the major upheavals and the substantial loss of power which followed the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church continued to largely influence Western politics well until the 21st century.

Thus, at the time of Velázquez, there was an intricate relation of interest between Church and state: Monarchs supported the Catholic faith, and Catholic thought endorsed the power of the emperors and helped them conquer the New World through the evangelization of the native people.

Sir Anthony Blunt, in his *Artistic Theory in Italy 1450-1660* (still considered a foundation work in Renaissance studies) dedicated a full chapter to the status of artists in Europe during that period. According to Blunt, the advent of scientific methods influenced the divide between what would be considered mere craftsmanship and the work of artists, who only began to achieve a higher social status in the 15th and 16th centuries. The theoretical discussion was whether painting and sculpture could be classified as liberal arts – practiced by freemen and requiring intellectual ability,

or by slaves using manual training. Therefore, the more an artist could integrate a knowledge of mathematics (in the form of proportion and linear perspective, for example) and other branches of learning in his work, the more he would be able to distance from mechanical art.

The claims of artists to better social positions took many forms, but the highest glory was to become a royal artist, which became a recognition of the nobility of the artist's work. In Spain, painters rarely achieved high social status, as painting was still largely considered a craft. Remarkably, Velázquez lived more than 3 decades with the royal family, became the palace chamberlain (*apostador mayor del palacio*) and the curator for the king's art collection. Besides that, he also had his own studio in the *Pieza Principal* (main room) at the Royal Alcázar of Madrid (today's Royal Palace of Madrid), where he painted *Las Meninas* and where King Phillip IV would often visit him.

3. LAS MENINAS

Celebrated as Diego Velázquez's masterpiece and one of the most important artworks in Western art history, *Las Meninas* is a very large (3.18 x 2.76 meters) oil on canvas that has been part of the Museo del Prado (Madrid) art collection since its foundation, in 1819:



Figure 2. *Las Meninas*, 1656.

The portrayal of the royal family, in which Infanta Margaret Theresa stands surrounded by her maidens and other members of the Spanish court, was earlier titled *The Family of Philip IV*, or simply *The Family*.

Studied by art historians and scholars at length, the painting has generated complex interpretations, as it is considered an enigmatic artwork: Velázquez himself is portrayed working on an unseen canvas, creating a painting inside the painting composition.



Figure 3. Las Meninas - detail.

The fact that the artist could not be, at the same time, the painter and the object of the painting creates a reality versus illusion effect that has left critics and audiences entertained for centuries. The mystery is enhanced by the fact that almost all subjects gaze at the possible viewers – or perhaps the royal couple, reflected on what seems to be a mirror on the back wall – as if the painting of the scene had been interrupted by their arrival:



Figure 4. Las Meninas - detail.

A man in black stands in the back of the room (which reproduces Velázquez's studio), adding to the oddness and ambiguity of the painting, which has left scholars debating for over three centuries on its meaning.

French philosopher Michel Foucault, in the book *The Order of Things*, has argued that *Las Meninas* is the representation of Classical representation: a painting about painting, in which Velázquez staged the invisibility of the painter, who was the source of the work but was made invisible by the mirror on the back wall. If the royal couple was what all eyes turned to look, the artist could not be outside painting. To Foucault, *Las Meninas* was a work of self-reflection and, in essence, the first modern painting.

Scholars such as Jonathan Brown have since denied the “hidden meanings” to the painting, offering less philosophical interpretations. However it may be, to this day, *Las Meninas* continues to generate curiosity and discussion.

4. POSSIBLE INTERPRETATIONS OF LAS MENINAS

The analysis that follows is based on the research of Jonathan Brown, as published in the book *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth Century Spanish Painting*.

A hypothesis about the non-existence of the mirror from the article entitled *The illusion of Mirrors: Velázquez's Las Meninas*, by author Simon Altman, complements Brown's theories and examples.

For purposes of context, the identities of the figures are delineated below. According to Brown, Antonio Palomino – who was a Spanish painter and art writer – was able to identify all the people in the artwork:



Figure 5. *Las Meninas* - list of characters.

The young girl in the center was Infanta Margarita Maria Teresa (1), heiress to the Spanish Crown at the time. The two girls immediately next to her are Isabel de Velasco (2) and Maria Augustina Sarmiento (3). On the right, two palace dwarfs can be seen: Mari-Bárbola (4) and Nicolas Pertusato (5), the court jester, who has his left foot placed on the mastiff dog. In the middle ground stands Infanta Margarita's chaperone, whose name is Marcela de Ulloa (6). In the center-back, a man is walking up a flight of stairs as he turns to look behind him; he is Jose de Nieto (8), who works for the royal family as the head of tapestry. Velázquez (9) stands in front of the canvas he is painting, palette on his arm, brush in hand. The man and woman in the mirror are King Philip IV of Spain and his wife, the Queen Mariana of Austria.

Not surprisingly, because of the painting's "snapshot" quality, Carl Justi – a German art historian who analyzed *Las Meninas* in the late 19th century – believed Velázquez was portraying a direct and true depiction of palace life at that time. This "photograph interpretation" of the piece contradicted the opinions of those who

wanted to entertain the notion that Velázquez might have been using his artistry to convey deeper meaning with the work. In 1949, however, Hungarian art historian Charles de Tolnay suggested the painting could be “an allegory of artistic creation,” and the proposal opened the door to a reexamination of the piece.

In an article published in 1960, Spanish architect Ramiro de Moya discusses studying *Las Meninas*, measuring it against the rules of perspective and recreating the scenario of Velázquez’s studio to see if the setting was indeed true to reality. To Moya, if Velázquez was following perspective, two things could be confirmed: that the mirror on the back wall reflected what the artist was painting (the king and queen) on his canvas and that Velázquez used a stand-in of himself to paint the image from the outside. Brown disagrees and says that Moya wrongfully believed that the science of how we see can be depicted in a two-dimensional drawing. Brown also cites that conflicting arguments arose amongst architects and engineers whose perspective drawings were entirely different.

An explanation of a narrative offered by Soehner and centered around the gaze of the characters in the room likewise discredits Moya. Soehner believes that the reason some of the figures have a suspended stare is directly because the king and queen are in the room. He also notes that Jose de Nieto’s attire affirms this, as it was customary to wear a cape before persons of royalty. These nuances, according to Soehner, all point to a royal presence in the quarters and the mirror positioned in the back wall with the king and queen confirm this.

Moreover, the image of aristocracy in the painter’s studio was a recurring one throughout art history and often used to promote art. The relationship between king and artist was important because what was patronized by nobility was also seen as noble. Velázquez revisits this imagery in his own work. Brown asserts that he would have known of such tradition and implies that its influence is portrayed in *Las Meninas* for the purposes of guaranteeing his status as a painter and confirming a friendship with the king. In addition, sources prove that Philip IV frequented Velázquez’s atelier regularly, further supporting the claim that Mariana of Austria and Philip IV are possibly present in the painting, either physically, or as a representation.

Brown declares *Las Meninas* an example of Baroque illusionism. An architect as well, Velázquez used his knowledge of geometry, mathematics and perspective to make a two-dimensional plane appear three-dimensional but also incorporated artistic elements. In this sense, the real and artificial are depicted in the painting. This aided in making the setting appear true-to-life while also allowing for manipulations of the scene. For example, the reflection of the mirror could now place Mariana and Philip in Velázquez’s space without the need to paint them standing next to him, which would have been against decorum. To solidify the attendance of the monarchs, the painter focuses on the faces of the figures, who are aware and responsive to the

royal presence.

Furthermore, through extensive research and evidence we know that *Las Meninas* is displaying the *pieza principal del cuarto del Príncipe*, an actual room in the royal palace. All of these facts lead many to conclude that the people present in the room that we cannot see are without a doubt the king and queen. It is important to note that if we are to believe this theory, the space in which Mariana and Philip stand is illusionary based on the architecture of the room. The “idea” of the royals being present is solely to make an ideological point about the nobleness of art and the couples’ immortality; existing forever in the room, on the wall and in the painting.

In an article entitled *The Illusion of Mirrors: Velázquez’s Las Meninas*, author Simon Altmann questions the existence of the mirror at all, which solidifies the idea that the mirror was a tool to represent the king and queen. Altmann believes Velázquez drew in a pretend mirror for the sole motivation of adding in the noble pair.

According to Altmann's research, there is no record of the mirror between 1636 to 1686, which would be odd because inventory of palace items would have been carefully documented. The size of the mirror is equally questionable given the period in which the painting was done. In addition, estimates show that the mirror in *Las Meninas* would have been larger than those of the Hall of Mirrors and of the king’s study. The idea that a painter would have a bigger mirror than the king in his atelier was highly unlikely, but were it so, the frame would not be made of wood as is the one in the picture. Mirrors of that size would have been decorated with ornate frames from Venice and frames made out of wood did not become available until much later.

Hence, if Moya was mistaken and the mirror does not portray what Velázquez is painting but instead reflects the royal couple in the room, what is the representation of Velázquez’s painting? Throughout the years, three responses have been formed: a) he could still be painting the king and queen (who were also reflected in the mirror); b) he might be painting Infanta Margarita and stopped to look at the couple when they walk-in and, finally, c) Velázquez was painting *Las Meninas* itself. Unfortunately, the answer cannot be confirmed because we have no clue as to what the large canvas in the painting looked like. Interestingly, it should be noted that the size of the canvas is similar to that of *Las Meninas*. If the painting that is being painted is *Las Meninas* itself, this would deepen the significance of the artwork because aside from royal attendance it would signify the acknowledgement and support of the couple for the picture and art. What can be affirmed is that *Las Meninas* was in good part a comment on the status of art and a desire to elevate the artist.

It is important to remember that during this period, artists were still considered beneath the ruling class, regardless of whether or not they held a respectable position in the king’s court, as did Diego Velázquez. Even the painter had to pay a

manufactured goods tax on works he painted. It was revolutionary, therefore, that the artist saw it fit to represent himself and his work in such a way that paralleled his status to the greatness of nobility. In Velázquez's eyes, he had earned the right and the position to do so and used his skills and intellectual ability to paint a picture in which he too was as relevant as those in the room with him.

It took Velázquez ten years to be accepted into the Order of Santiago; but this could only have been possible with the intervention of Philip IV. According to Palomino, after Velázquez died, Philip had the red cross of the Knights of Santiago added to the painter's tunic in *Las Meninas*. To many, this was a sign of the king's recognition of the artist and an elevation of the status of painter and painting in the court of Spain.

5. CONCLUSION

Throughout the past three centuries, dozens of interpretations of *Las Meninas* have been offered by art historians. While some have assumed that the painting is a literal representation of the Royal family – a genre scene of court life, with the king and queen reflected in the mirror behind Velázquez, others have contended that the painting is a representation of a classical representation: a painting about painting, raising ambiguity about the point of view of the artist and of possible onlookers. The fact is that Velázquez painted himself in a self-referential representation, along with his royal subjects, challenging long established social norms and paralleling, in honor, the artist and his art to the highest nobility of his time.

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