

VELÁZQUEZ'S *LAS MENINAS*

Edited by

SUZANNE L. STRATTON-PRUITT



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 2003

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

Typeface Bembo 11/13.5 pt. System L^AT_EX 2_E [TB]

A catalog record for this book is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Velázquez, Diego, 1599–1660.

Velázquez' Las Meninas / edited by Suzanne L. Stratton-Pruitt.

p. cm. – (Masterpieces of Western painting)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-80057-9 (hb.) – ISBN 0-521-80488-4 (pb.)

1. Velázquez, Diego, 1599–1660. Maids of honor. 2. Painting—Spain—Madrid.
3. Museo del Prado. I. Stratton, Suzanne L. II. Title. III. Series.

ND813.V4 A68 2002

759.6 – dc21

2002025738

ISBN 0 521 80057 9 hardback

ISBN 0 521 80488 4 paperback

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INTRODUCTION

King Philip IV of Spain died in 1666, six years after the death of his court painter Diego de Velázquez y Silva. As required by the king's death, the painter Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo, Velázquez's son-in-law, proceeded to inventory the royal collection of paintings. In this 1666 inventory, the first written record of a work created in 1656, Mazo described a large painting "portraying" the Infanta Margarita with "her ladies-in-waiting [*meninas*] and a female dwarf, by the hand of Velázquez."

The first substantive description of the painting is in a manuscript treatise on painting, dated 1696, by the Portuguese Felix da Costa:

To Diego de Velázquez the painter, Philip IV, King of Castile, gave the order of Santiago, which is the chief honor of that realm, as well as the key of the [royal] chamber. His own wit perpetuated this honor in a picture which adorns a room of the palace at Madrid, showing the portrait of the Empress, the daughter of Philip IV, together with his own. Velázquez painted himself in a cape bearing the cross of Santiago, with the key [to the chamber] at his belt, and holding a palette of oils and brushes in the act of painting, with his glance upon the Empress, and putting his hand with the brush to the canvas. At his left, and on the other side of the picture, we see the little Princess standing among kneeling ladies-in-waiting who are amusing her. [Nearby] is a large dog belonging to the palace, lying down obediently among these ladies. The picture seems more like a portrait of Velázquez than of the Empress.¹

Indeed, inventories of the royal palace, the Alcázar, give some prominence to the fact that Velázquez “portrayed himself painting.” However, the work is described in later documents as representing *La familia de Felipe IV* and did not appear in print with its now highly recognizable title of *Las Meninas* until 1843.

Antonio Palomino, in his biography of Spanish painters published in 1724, described *Las Meninas* with more detailed information than provided by Felix da Costa. When Palomino arrived in Madrid in 1678, there were still individuals at the Spanish court who had known Velázquez and could provide the artist/theorist with the identification of all the figures in the painting. Palomino titled his description of the painting as the section of his biography of the painter “in which the most illustrious work of Velázquez is described.” Because all subsequent studies of the painting have depended on Palomino, it is worthwhile to open this volume of essays on the history and “critical fortunes” of the painting by quoting him in full:

Among the marvelous paintings made by Don Diego Velázquez was the large picture with the portrait of the Empress – then Infanta of Spain – Doña Margarita María of Austria when she was very young. There are no words to describe her great charm, liveliness, and beauty, but her portrait itself is the best panegyric. At her feet kneels Doña María Agustina – one of the Queen’s Meninas and daughter of Don Diego Sarmiento – serving her water from a clay jug. At her other side is Doña Isabel de Velasco – daughter of Don Bernardino López de Ayala y Velasco, Count of Fuen-salida and His Majesty’s Gentleman of the Bedchamber, also a Menina and later Lady of Honor – In an attitude and with a movement precisely as if she were speaking. In the foreground is a dog lying down, and next to it is the midget Nicolasito Pertusato, who treads on it so as to show – together with the ferociousness of its appearance – its tameness and its gentleness when tried; for when it was being painted it remained motionless in whatever attitude it was placed. This figure is dark and prominent and gives great harmony to the composition. Behind it is Maribárbola, a dwarf of formidable aspect; farther back and in half-shadow is Doña Marcela de Ulloa – Lady of Honor – and a Guarda Damas, who give a marvelous effect to the figural composition.

On the other side is Don Diego Velázquez painting; he has a palette of colors in the left hand and the brush in his right, the double key of the Bedchamber and of Chamberlain of the Palace at his waist, and on his breast the badge of Santiago, which was painted in after his death by order of His Majesty; for when Velázquez painted this picture the King had not yet bestowed on him that honor. Some say that it was His Majesty himself who painted it for the encouragement that having such an exalted chronicler would give to the practitioners of this very noble art. I regard this portrait of Velázquez as no lesser in art than that of Phidias, famous sculptor and painter, who placed his portrait on the shield of the statue of the goddess Minerva that he had made, crafting it with such cunning that if it were to be removed from its place, the whole statue would also come apart. Titian made his name no less eternal by portraying himself holding in his hands another portrait with the effigy of King Philip II, and just as Phidias's name was never effaced while the statue of Minerva remained whole, and Titian's as long as that of King Philip II endured, so too that of Velázquez will endure from century to century, as long as that of the lofty and precious Margarita endures, in whose shadow he immortalizes his image under the benign influence of such a sovereign mistress.

The canvas on which he is painting is large and nothing of what is painted on it can be seen, for it is viewed from the back, the side that rests on the easel. Velázquez demonstrated his brilliant talent by revealing what he was painting through an ingenious device, making use of the crystalline brightness of a mirror painted at the back of the gallery and facing the picture, where the reflection, or repercussion, of our Catholic King and Queen, Philip and Mariana, is represented. On the walls of the gallery that is depicted here and where it was painted (which is in the Prince's Apartments), various pictures can be seen, even though dimly lit. They can be recognized as works by Rubens and as representing scenes from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. This gallery has several windows seen in diminishing size, which make its depth seem great; the light enters through them from the left, but only from the first and last ones. The floor is plain and done with such good perspective that it looks as if one could walk on it; the same amount of ceiling can be seen. To the mirror's left there is an open door leading to a staircase, and there stands José Nieto,

the Queen's Chamberlain; the resemblance is great despite the distance and the diminution in size and light where Velázquez assumes him to be. There is atmosphere between the figures, the composition is superb, the idea new; in brief, there is no praise that can match the taste and skill of this work, for it is reality, and not painting.

Don Diego Velázquez finished it in the year 1656, leaving in it much to admire and nothing to surpass. If he had not been so modest, Velázquez could have said about this painting what Zeuxis said about his beautiful Penelope, a work of which he was greatly satisfied: *In visurum aliquem, facilius, quam imitaturum*, that it would be easier to envy it than to imitate it.

This painting was highly esteemed by His Majesty, and while it was being executed he went frequently to see it being painted. So did our lady Doña Mariana of Austria and the Infantas and ladies, who came down often, considering this a delightful treat and entertainment. It was placed in His Majesty's office in the lower Apartments, among other excellent works.

When Luca Giordano came – in our day – and got to see it, he was asked by King Charles II, who saw him looking thunderstruck, “What do you think of it?” And he said, “Sire, this is the Theology of Painting.” By which he meant that just as Theology is the highest among the branches of knowledge, so was that picture the best there was in Painting.²

Las Meninas was installed in the private office of the king, the “Cuarto Bajo de Verano,” a semisubterranean room in the Madrid Alcázar (royal palace). The painting’s proximity to the king himself certainly indicates his partiality to the work, although it should be noted that his eclectic taste was reflected in the other twenty-five paintings listed in the 1666 inventory of the apartment, including *Pomona* and *Vertumnus* by Rubens and Van Dyck’s *Selene and Endymion Surprised by a Satyr*, as well as marble bureaus inlaid with jasper and seven large mirrors with fretwork frames of bronze and ebony. Although these summer quarters of the king were on a rather intimate scale as compared to the royal palace in its entirety, it was decorated with an eye toward the exalted, although restricted, persons who were able to visit the king there: members of the royal family and family servants, cardinals and papal nuncios, viceroys, presidents of the Council of State, and

the king's minister (his *valido*, or "favorite").³ After the death of Philip IV, *Las Meninas* remained in the Alcázar until its destruction in a fire in 1734. The painting was thereafter moved to the new royal palace, the Palacio de Oriente, where it was seen in the "Sala de Conversación" in 1776 and, somewhat later, in the king's "Sala de Cena" (dining room), a space now called the "Antecámara de Gasparini." All this to say that *Las Meninas* was seen by few and was thus little known until much of the royal art collection was moved into the new Museo del Prado, which opened to the public in 1819. Between Palomino's detailed description of the painting published in 1724 and critical responses to the painting in the nineteenth century, there is little to illuminate our understanding of the work. One eighteenth-century response to the painting, the comment of the Neoclassicist Anton Raphael Mengs, reveals more about Mengs' taste than about the painting: "as this work is already so well known on account of its excellence, I have nothing to add but that it stands as proof that the effects caused by the imitation of the Natural can satisfy all classes of people, particularly those who have not the highest appreciation of Beauty."⁴

In the nineteenth century, "the Natural" lost the negative connotation placed on it by Mengs, and *Las Meninas* became an icon of Baroque Naturalism (as opposed to the idealizing qualities of Italian Renaissance art, or the Baroque classicism of Guido Reni, or the neoclassicism of David, Ingres, – or Mengs). In the first three essays in this volume Alisa Luxenberg, Xanthe Brooke, and M. Elizabeth Boone discuss how *Las Meninas* was interpreted by critics and artists of the nineteenth century as an icon reflective of their own time and tastes, from Realism to Impressionism (especially in the book about Velázquez by R.A.M. Stevenson) to the American Aesthetic movement, with the most pervasive reading of the painting based on its supposed truth to nature, its depiction of an actual moment in time, its likeness to photography. In the finest monograph on Velázquez of the nineteenth century, published in the closing years of that century, Carl Justi simply described the subject of the painting as a *tableau vivant*, and animated the figures into an imaginary narrative:

It happened that on one occasion, when the royal couple were giving a sitting to their Court painter in his studio, Princess Margaret was sent for to relieve their Majesties' weariness.

The light, which, after the other shutters had been closed, had been let in from the window on the right from the sitters, now also streamed in upon their little visitor. At the same time Velazquez requested Nieto to open the door in the rear, in order to see whether a front light might also be available.⁵

During the twentieth century, art historians have approached the painting as an acknowledged masterpiece produced within the context of its own time. Justi had made a noble effort to do just that, but he was inevitably swayed by his own nineteenth-century context, in which Velázquez was honored for the naturalism of his art, for its apparent artlessness. The fourth essay in this volume is intended to introduce to a general reader the at first bewildering number of approaches to and interpretations of *Las Meninas* taken by art historians during the twentieth century. These have invested the painting with a variety of allegorical and emblematic meanings certainly closer to the mind set of seventeenth-century Spanish culture of Spain than Justi's anecdotal reading of it. However, sometimes the best efforts of scholars have eventually proven unconvincing, and the more convincing interpretations do not always agree with each other. As well, since the early 1980s there have been a number of articles about *Las Meninas* published by philosophers and art historians pursuing theoretical approaches to the painting unimaginable to earlier generations of art critics and historians.

The latter have been largely impelled by the essay on *Las Meninas* by Michel Foucault that was published in 1964 in *Les Mots et les Choses*. The fifth essay in this anthology, by Estrella de Diego, analyzes this notoriously difficult (and therefore often misunderstood) essay in order to help the reader understand what Foucault intended – and what he did not intend.

Finally, Gertje Utley examines the reflections, responses, and appropriations of *Las Meninas* in twentieth-century art, from Picasso to the electronic media of today. It is hoped that these essays will serve the reader as an introduction to the historiography and influence of *Las Meninas* to date and as a firm basis for further exploration. We can be reasonably sure, however, that Velázquez's masterpiece will continue to provoke thought, research, and perhaps even more ways of thinking and looking than are considered in this volume. There is no last word.

NOTES

- 1 The treatise has been published in facsimile and translated by George Kubler and others. *The Antiquity of the Art of Painting by Felix da Costa*, with introduction and notes by Kubler (Yale University Press, 1967), p. 458.
- 2 Palomino's theoretical treatise, the *Museo pictórico y escala óptica*, was published in two volumes in Madrid in 1715 and 1724. The biographies of the artists, called *El Parnaso español pintoresco laureado*, appeared in 1724 as a third volume bound with the second. This quotation is from Nina Ayala Mallory's translated and annotated edition of the *Lives of the Eminent Spanish Painters and Sculptors by Antonio Palomino* (Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 164–6.
- 3 For the early history of the painting, see Fernando Mariás, "Las Meninas de Velázquez, del despacho de Felipe IV al cenador de Carlos III," in *Velázquez y Calderón: Dos genios de Europa (IV Centenario, 1500–1600, 1999–2000)*. Madrid, 2000.
- 4 Ibid., p. 161: "siendo ya tan conocida esta obra por su excelencia, no tengo que decir sino que con ella se pueda convencer, que el efecto que causa la imitación del Natural es el que suele contentar a toda clase de gentes, particularmente donde no se hace el principal aprecio de la Belleza." Mengs' comments on *Las Meninas* were published by Antonio Ponz in his *Viage de España* (Madrid, 1772–1794), Vol. 6, p. 200.
- 5 Carl Justi, *Diego Velázquez and His Times*, trans. by A. H. Keane and revised by the author (London 1889), p. 416. Justi's *Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert* was first published in Bonn in 1888.