

Critical Analysis of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*

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Very few works of art can be described as brilliant masterpieces. That is surely the very least that can be written about *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez, a group portrait of the court of Spanish King Philip IV. It has been studied by artists and critics alike not only for its technical mastery, but also because of the many symbolic representations it contains. Madlyn Millner Kahr wrote in her essay, "Velázquez and *Las Meninas*," that indeed Velázquez created something truly extraordinary, and she suggested likely influences he may have had. She also wrote that Velázquez had a greater purpose in mind when he created the masterpiece—he wanted to gain a coveted title that would ensure him a high place in society. Kahr discussed three major issues in her essay. She described the painting itself, suggested the likelihood of Flemish influences, and also discussed Velázquez's desire for an aristocratic title greater than any single court position he could hold. He wanted ennoblement.

Las Meninas is a masterpiece indeed. "The picture is unbelievably complex, a kind of exercise in dexterity that only an established painter would attempt in order to prove that he could do it. The various planes are indicated by perspective, the interplay of light and dark, and a clever use of colors. The figures are well done and breathe vitality, but the essential mystery of this work lies outside such considerations" (Michener 407). Velázquez's amazing work relies on the effect of the brushwork, and on the delicate harmony of the colors, shapes, and individuals depicted. He may be one of the top painters who ever lived, and his *Las Meninas* may "... well be the most thrilling portrayal of humanity ever created, a combination of portrait, self portrait, illusion, reality, dream, romance, likeness and propaganda ever painted..." (Hoving 226). His esteemed masterpiece certainly contains all of these qualities, and many more.

The artist was born Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez in Seville, Spain. He showed artistic talent early on, and was sent at a young age by his parents to study with master painter Francisco Herrera. But young Diego soon wanted more artistic freedom so he decided to join the studio of Francisco Pacheco. From Pacheco, he learned not only the fine art of painting, but matured into young adulthood by also being taught literature and philosophy. It was under the apprenticeship of Pacheco that he developed his naturalistic style (Hoving 226). He began by painting scenes of the common people, and these were carefully drawn in natural settings or from models he may have used at the time. Still-life paintings weren't held in high regard at the time, but Pacheco said that they should be "if they were painted as Velázquez painted them" (48). With that statement, he acknowledged that his pupil had surpassed him in talent. When Velázquez was 20 he married Juana, the daughter of Pacheco, and eventually had two daughters with her.

Before discussing Kahr's description of the painting, it is worthwhile to be aware of the elements of the painting itself. The scene in *Las Meninas* (Figure 1) is both structured and united through the use of color and light. *Las Meninas* is an oil on canvas painting, is approximately 318 by 276 centimeters in size, was completed in

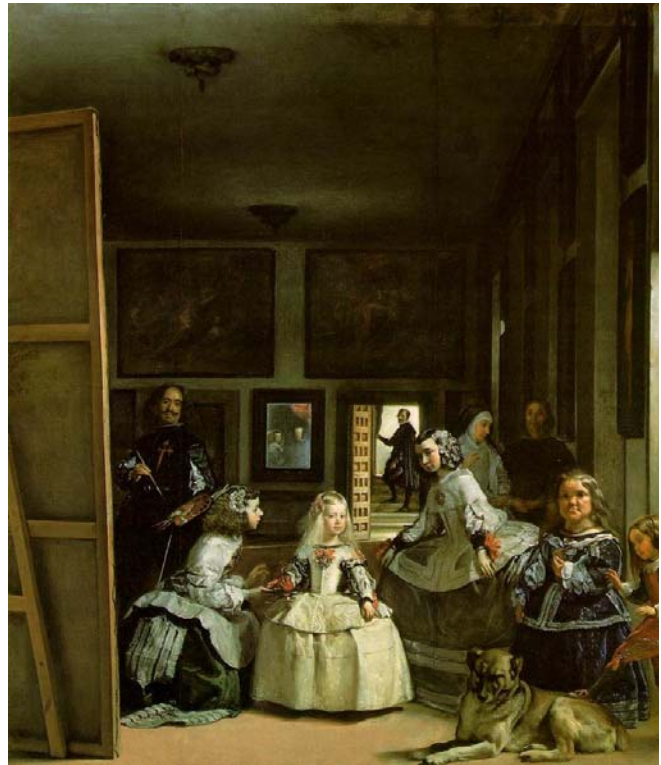


Fig. 1: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*

1656, and had been held in the Spanish royal collections until the opening in 1819 of the Museo del Prado in Madrid, Spain. The painting was identified as *El Cuadro de la Familia* in

seventeenth-century inventories of the Royal Palace at Madrid (Martin 337). It was listed as *La Familia de Felipe IV* in 1734, but was not given its popular title *Las Meninas*¹ until 1843 (Kahr 228). The alteration in title changed the focus from the royal family to the young female attendants. They were girls from aristocratic families who were brought up to serve at court, but were not royalty themselves. The final change in title might be a reflection of the change in attitude about contemporary women, or as a shifting of the perception of feminine ideals (Luxenberg 25).

Las Meninas unfolds on several different planes within a high-ceilinged, sparsely furnished room of the royal palace. Seven conspicuous planes are (i) a canvas being painted by Velázquez, (ii) a dog and a midget, (iii) the little princess with her maids of honor and a dwarf, (iv) Velázquez himself, (v) a man and a woman, (vi) a mirror on a wall with other paintings, and (vii) a man in a doorway.

Antonio Palomino, who published a biography² of Spanish painters in 1724, identified the individuals in the painting (Stratton-Pruitt 2-3). The central focal point is the royal princess, Doña Margarita María of Austria, also referred to as The Infanta. Attending to her are two of the Queen's maids of honor, Doña María Agustina on the left, and Doña Isabel de Velasco on the right. We also see Velázquez himself standing back from the easel. Behind Doña Isabel are two older individuals—Doña Marcela de Ulloa, and an unnamed Guarda Damas³. In a doorway at the very back of the painting stands José Nieto, the Queen's chamberlain, and to the left of him on the back wall is a mirrored reflection of the king and queen. The foremost image is that of the passive dog. With his foot on the dog is the midget Nicolasito Pertusato, and next to him is the

¹ Menina was originally the Portuguese word for “girl.”

² Originally titled, El Parnaso Español Pintoresco Laureado

³ A male escort for ladies of the court

dwarf Maribárbola⁴. The commonality of all of these figures is that they are all members of the royal dwelling. The act of placing himself in the painting shows us that Velázquez believes that he deserves to be in their company.

An essential component of all Baroque painting is light. Baroque artists largely gave up the Renaissance convention of centralizing a single subject with light. They chose instead to use light in such a way as to establish several focal points within a painted work. Light can be used to craft a poetic atmosphere and, “The gossamer effect of this light (in *Las Meninas*) prevents the whole from breaking down into individual parts. Instead, the atmosphere unites the disparate elements of the painting, while questions raised by this painting about the nature of vision and pictorial reality give it a cryptic quality” (Triadó 65). Indeed, the light in this painting seems confusing. It appears to be coming from slightly above horizontal center and off to the right. The face of the princess is illuminated from up and slightly to the right. But since the part in the hair of the female dwarf is illuminated, and her right cheek is shadowed, and since the little boy’s face is totally in shadow, the light must be coming from slightly behind the plane that the dwarf is on. But if this is the case, it is difficult to explain how the mirror in the background seems so uniformly illuminated. Contrary to the adage that “mirrors never lie,” Kahr suggests that the mirror “hints at its own unreality” (243).

The light does not seem to be evenly reflected in *Las Meninas*. The man and woman standing behind the maid to the right appear to be only about five or six feet behind her, but they are completely in shadows. Starting with the illuminated face of Margarita, we notice decreasing clarity and illumination as we proceed at an angle slightly up and to the right to the standing maid, the woman, and then the man. The primary light definitely comes from the upper right somewhere, perhaps in the adjacent room, and this shows itself well on the face of Velázquez,

⁴ Kahr references these two individuals with different spellings, as “Nicolasio Pertusato,” and “Mari Barbola.”

whose dominant point of illumination is just above and slightly to the right of his left brow. Palomino proffered a description of the light source by writing that “this gallery has several windows seen in diminishing size, which makes its depth seem great; the light enters through them from the left, but only from the first and last ones” (Pacheco and Palomino 148).

The elements of light and color are just part of why Velázquez’s work is considered a masterpiece. Frederic Taubes wrote that “the overall mastery in the use of pictorial means, the fact that it (*Las Meninas*) stands at the highest level any artist could attain, would not alone establish the painting in the galaxy of masterpieces. It is rather the imponderable that raises the realistic representation to the sphere of the transcendental” (106). He thought that even the dog in the painting had a surreal aura of contentment considering the action going on around it.

Velázquez was a master of brushwork, and a virtuoso with his tools. His brushwork highlights and distinguishes the various textures in the clothing worn by the people in the painting. “In each polarity, black and white, there are exquisite refinements” (Rosenblum and Janson 279). Velázquez would occasionally use long-handled brushes that allowed him to stand a little farther from the canvas, enabling a slightly improved quality for the viewer of the finished work (Moffit 161).

Velázquez had been appointed the king’s painter at the age of 25 after the king had been impressed with three prior portraits. Artists had served kings for centuries, and were often a member of the royal court, albeit a member of low status. Greater prestige for the artist was possible through the succession of promotions within the court. Palomino provided the various succession of positions for Velázquez, starting with Painter to the Bedchamber (1623), Usher to the King’s Bedchamber (1627), Gentleman of the Wardrobe, Gentleman of the Bedchamber

(1642) and Chief Chamberlain of the Palace (1652). But Velázquez aspired to a still greater honor, the highest in Spain at the time for an aristocrat—the royal Order of Santiago.

Velázquez had the favorable position of being the keeper of pictures for Philip IV, “...a more enviable position no painter has ever achieved” (Taubes 105). Admiring the king’s collection “...confirmed in him his natural predilection for the painterly and his indifference to the more linear tradition (Honour, Hugh and Fleming 595). King Philip IV actually sent him to Italy on two occasions around 1649 to 1650 to acquire paintings and antiques. On these two trips, he was very impressed with sixteenth-century Venetian painting, especially that of Tintoretto and Titian. As Velázquez matured as a painter, he preferred more painterly⁵ colors. By using hues with very little contrast between them, he was able to create a soft, darkish atmosphere. The colors that predominated in Spanish paintings around the time of this work were ochre tones, earthy reds and yellows.

Kahr provided examples of painters who likely influenced Velázquez. They were from Antwerp, Belgium, or nearby and included Frans Francken II, Hieronymus II, Willem van Haecht II, Johan Wierix, Hans Burgkmair, Lucas Vorsterman and David Teniers II. He was likely influenced by a class of paintings known as “Gallery Pictures,” that were primarily Flemish in origin. They were distinct in that they were paintings of groups of people doing ordinary things inside, and with the far wall of the subject room being parallel to the picture plane (Kahr 229).

The context of the *Las Meninas* seems clear upon first glance. With her positioning in the center of the activity, and with the most light being focused on her, the princess, The Infanta Margarita is the definite focal point. She is being attended to by two maids of honor in a darkish

⁵ Nineteenth-century publications list three major phases of Velázquez’s development as an artist. His early linear mode evolved into a more painterly style, and then matured into the highly painterly style that we recognize in *Las Meninas* (Luxenberg 34).

room with a very high ceiling. Among other things, *Las Meninas* represents “the protected world of childhood” (Boone 104).

But upon closer observation, it appears to be a painting about a painting, and about the status of the artist (Kahr 240). An artist is working on a painting, and is standing back from the canvas. It is Velázquez himself, and on this level it is a self-portrait. We can't see the front of the painting that sets on the easel. Our only possible understanding of the subject of the painting in *Las Meninas* is to look at the mirror in the back of the room. It shows King Philip IV and Queen Mariana⁶ who presumably are in front of the painting where the viewer would be standing. “The painting is based on a visual pun in that the spectator takes the place of the king and queen, whom Velázquez is busy painting” (Lucie-Smith 266). Velázquez recognized that even simple scenes in everyday life had a transcendent quality and we, as spectators, see the scene unfold from our vantage point.

We see the reflection of the king and queen in the mirror as they as they would be positioned in the front (i.e., from the viewer's position). The entire scene is painted from the point of view of the royal couple. “This intentional confusing of the characters within the painting and ‘actuality’ gives this scene a strong feeling of unreality, despite all of the realism with which it is painted” (Anderson 45). So Velázquez painted not what *he* saw, but what the *royal couple* saw, a clever, yet gracious way to show deference to them.

The mirror is actually off center, so it really is difficult to ascertain if it is reflecting the king and queen entering the room, seated in the room, or depicting an image on the canvas that Velázquez is standing back from. Kahr wrote that it is improbable that the mirror would have been so perfectly placed that we see a balanced portrait of the royal couple. She thought that it

⁶ Queen Isabel had died, and while Velázquez was sojourning in Italy, King Philip IV remarried to Mariana of Austria.

might be slightly more probable that it reflected a painting hung on the opposite wall (228). One more possibility is that what looks like a mirror in the background is actually a painted portrait of the king and queen, presumably illuminated on purpose as a symbol of respect, or possibly to impress them. The mirror definitely adds an element of unreality to the painting, and supports the case that the artist used the convention for a purpose (viz., to elevate his status in the eyes of the king).

Many art critics and historians write that there are two dwarfs in the painting. But they have also been described as being one midget and one dwarf (Adams 702), which is a more accurate distinction. Although often used interchangeably, the two words don't technically mean the same. A *dwarf* is one who is physically deformed with fairly large limbs and a small body. Maribárbola probably suffered from a common type of dwarfism known as achondroplasia (Kahr 243). In contrast, a *midget* is a very small person with limbs that are in proportion to the body, a human being in miniature, so to speak. Nicolasito's appearance is consistent with this condition, known as pituitary infantilism. Kahr suggested that Nicolasito and Maribárbola (and also the dog) were considered the "pets" of the Infanta (242). "Little people" were often allowed in court as objects of amusement, and were sometimes even considered alter egos for royalty due to their obvious visually unimposing physical differences. Their presence in the painting is therefore one of normalcy and routine for everyday life in the royal court, and added variety in the form of many different types of occupants within the room.

Some critics observe the hierarchy of palace rank by the positioning of people within the painting, with the royal couple being conspicuously out of the painting in the position of the observer, then to their daughter and her assistants, to their painter Velázquez, and down to the administrative assistant (Moffit 162). Kahr wrote that it would not have been proper to include

the king and queen in the painting in such a scene of casual atmosphere (241). By placing their images in the mirror, Velázquez showed the courtesy of including them, and with the technique also alluded to their approval of him.

Painting and sculpture were considered crafts in Spain since the artists worked with their hands (Adams 701). Unlike painting in Italy, which was considered a liberal art, painting was considered merely a handicraft⁷ in Spain. On his travels, Velázquez would have surely noticed the greater appreciation for artists in both Italy and Belgium. Velázquez worked hard to elevate the profession of a painter to the status at least equal to that of a musician. He didn't want to just be considered a laborer. Velázquez added a sense of deference, especially since "He painted himself in a position that is logical both in the context of the painting and for the courtly world of rank" (Elsen 13). Kahr agreed by mentioning what Palomino had written centuries before, that *Las Meninas* "glorified Velázquez by projecting him into history in the company of the Infanta Margarita" (240).

Velázquez advanced the idea of the nobility of painting not only by his proximity to royalty, but also by the way he is confidently posing in the painting (Moffit 163). Some have suggested that this alludes to a spiritual component of the artist in that mind is superior to matter. Kahr disagrees with this notion, preferring instead to suggest that Velázquez is simply standing back from his easel to be able to better see his subjects. He is therefore indicating "the dignity of a painter *as painter*" (Kahr 240). The painter not only contemplates, but must also act. His aristocratic pose thereby reaffirms that true artistic creation means that the physical *and* mental are dualistically indistinguishable in creating a painting.

⁷ The Medieval grouping of the seven liberal arts included grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, music, geometry and astronomy. Poetry was eventually incorporated, but handicrafts and sciences were excluded. (Rowell 21). Painting as an art form was eventually respected, but not everywhere in Europe to the same degree at the same time.

Velázquez wanted to elevate painting in Spain as a liberal art, and thus as a respectable endeavor. In addition, he wanted an aristocratic title. Royalty in the Netherlands were often depicted in paintings along with the artists, implying a high social status for the painters (Kahr 234). Velázquez would already have been aware that two great contemporary Antwerp masters, Rubens and Van Dyck⁸, had been rewarded both financially and socially.

Conspicuously on Velázquez's black tunic in *Las Meninas* is a red cross of St. James, the emblem of the Order of Santiago. Since Velázquez was not knighted into this order until 1659, it was likely added to the painting at or after that time. The legend of King Philip IV himself later painting the cross on the canvas added to the impression of its value (Luxenberg 13). Ironically, to gain the rank, testimony had to be presented from witnesses who could verify that he had not worked for money. Working for money would have suggested that he had been involved in a trade, and a tradesman was not much better than a craftsman⁹, and surely not worthy of being considered for the order.

If Velázquez did intend for King Philip IV and his wife to be in the position of the viewer of *Las Meninas*, then the view of Margarita is the view that the king would have had. The psychological center of the painting is thus that of the king himself (Moffit 162). Gombrich suggested that the princess may have been brought in for the royal couple to enjoy to alleviate the boredom of sitting still so long for a portrait. Kahr would agree with that notion by observing that children, due to their exuberance, were often the center of attention (228), just as they are in any household. Perhaps the royal couple humbly suggested that the beautiful little princess was a more worthy subject for a painting than they were. The words spoken by a king or queen were

⁸ Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony Van Dyck (1599-1641) were Flemish Baroque-era painters.

⁹ Crafts had been taxed in Spain in the seventeenth century (Stratton-Pruitt 129), another reason Velázquez would not have wanted to be associated with a craft or a trade.

often treated as a command, and Velázquez may have actually made her inclusion a reality for them (Gombrich 323).

According to Moffit (162), the room that the painting depicts is a rectangular chamber just outside the studio that Velázquez worked in. The two proportionally accurate paintings in the background were copies of works by Rubens, and were painted by Velázquez's brother-in-law, Juan Bautista Martínez del Mazo (Kahr 244). They were *Palles and Arachne* on the left, and *Contest of Pan and Apollo* on the right (Stratton-Pruitt 128-129). Both pictures correspond to myths which symbolize the victory of art over simple craftsmanship. Collectively they represent four ancient arts, with music and tapestry symbolically placed above the manual arts of metalwork and sculpture (Moffit 162). Velázquez represents, of course, the more modern art of painting.

Since Velázquez spent much of his professional life in the service of the Spanish court, he was able to get to know the king on intimate terms. He was highly talented, so it is easy to see why King Philip IV wanted Velázquez to project his image favorably to the public.

As Kahr pointed out, Velázquez was likely influenced by Flemish painters. Velázquez's work has, in turn, influenced others. *Las Meninas* has influenced numerous other painters, including another famous Spanish painter, Goya¹⁰, who copied it in an etching. Like Velázquez, Goya included a self-portrait by standing in the shadowy darkness in his famous painting *Family of Charles IV*, and also included vast space within the painted room, as was observable in the very large room in *Las Meninas* (Rosenbaum and Janan 52).

The mirror effect is another technique that other artists have been influenced by. John Singer Sargent included it in his *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*. Edouard Manet included a mirror reflection in his *The Bar at the Folies-Bergère*. Manet actually took the idea even

¹⁰ Goya's full name was Francisco de Goya y Lucientes.

further. While Velázquez's work had dark shadows, Manet's work had more bold silhouettes countered by an abundance of delicate and subtle pastel hues. "By ... conjuring up presences both within and outside the painting, Velázquez creates a psychological as well as a spatial tension between the work of art and the beholder" (Martin 168). Any artist incorporating the mirror convention must surely owe a debt of gratitude to the genius of Velázquez.

Velázquez was a master of the geometrical configuration of elements within his works. There are different interpretations as to what the various elements within the painting signify. Kahr described many elements that may lend themselves to interpretive differences, but they are more understandable considering that Velázquez wanted to elevate himself and also show respect for the king at the same time. For example, Velázquez placed his head in the painting higher than any other, but he also painted the hand of José Nieto pointing directly at the king. But one question that still lingers pertains to what it was that Velázquez was painting on the hidden canvas. It is unknown, but it really doesn't matter. His intent, as Kahr perspicaciously observed, was merely to show that the canvas is a tool of a painter, and the most important point was the *act* of painting, not the subject matter of the painting itself (229).

Differing interpretations are what make the painting so intriguing, even after several centuries. Regardless of the various interpretations and understandings, Velázquez surely comprehended the moment in time that the painting reflects, and by painting the scene just as it happened, he recorded a very intimate glimpse of a snapshot in time of the royal family. It shows them in action, yet frozen for eternity. Just as the mirror on the wall reflects the image of the royal couple, the painting itself reflects an image of a single moment of time.

The curators of the Museo del Prado have referred to *Las Meninas* as "the culminating work of universal painting" (Michener 408). It certainly does hold all of the best things that can

be said about a masterpiece with which so many mysteries are associated. It is ethereal, atmospheric, and elegant. As a portrayal of humanity, it indicates a depth of understanding through its power of execution. The softness of touch with Velázquez's brushwork reveals a tenderness of humanity. Thomas Hoving aptly described *Las Meninas* "...as an image of an instant that has been made infinite" (226). Its complexity will no doubt continue to be explored, studied and contemplated.

King Charles II once asked a man who was enthralled by the painting what he thought of it. The man is reputed to have replied that the masterpiece was "the theology of painting" (Palomino 166). He meant that while theology was perceived as the highest branch of knowledge at the time, Velázquez's masterpiece was the highest form of quality in the realm of painting.

With conventions he was likely exposed to from works by Flemish painters, he created a masterpiece, one that honors humanity. "Art pertains to the higher functions of humanity" (Kahr 232). As such, Velázquez elevated himself. He also elevated painting in general, to a higher level of deserved recognition. He was so impressed with the respect and noble recognition that was given to Flemish and Italian painters that he wanted to reach the highest level he could in Spanish society. He earned his coveted aristocratic rank. By being duly respectful of the king by implying his presence just outside the picture plane, he has put us, as viewer, in the same exalted position. And with that magnanimous gesture, *Las Meninas* connects Velázquez with humanity for eternity.

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¹¹ This book combines translated excerpts from Pacheco's Arte de la Pintura (1649) and Palomino's El Parnaso Español Pintoresco Laureado (1724).

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