

VELÁZQUEZ

New York, Metropolitan Museum, 3. Oktober 1989—7. Januar 1990; Madrid, Museo del Prado, 23. Januar—30. März 1990.

(with four illustrations)

Europeans have every reason to be grateful to the Prado Museum for negotiating a Madrid showing for the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Velázquez exhibition. In Spain, furthermore, all the major Velázquez works from the Prado itself were part of the show, making some eighty items in all. This was a rare opportunity to compare great paintings from Edinburgh, London, Munich, New York, Vienna, Washington and elsewhere, with the glories of Madrid and the lesser wonders from other cultural centres in the peninsula: an extraordinary feast, without doubt. Not everything about the exhibition was a matter for congratulation and thanksgiving, however. Was it right, for instance, to hold the show within the Prado Museum, denying the ordinary visitor access for a period to a major part of the collection? Or, to put it another way, did everything have to be included? Then there was the unacceptable level of queuing and herding involved. At weekends in February, visitors stood in line for nine hours or more, at a stretch. There must be a more humane, or more modern, system for dealing with such a persistent demand for culture than making people queue outside museums, watched by full-length security guards and pendant pairs of equestrian police. At the same time, it has to be admitted that the system — or lack of it — provided foreign visitors with an extra exhibit to admire in Madrid: the great Spanish public, displaying remarkable resilience and typical conviviality in its passionate pursuit of Velázquez. Can it be that the King's Painter, and the painter's painter, has become the people's painter at last?

Time has evidently done nothing to diminish Velázquez's appeal, but it has not been too kind to his canvases. Some of his colours have changed, especially the blues, we are told, and the surface of many of his paintings, like the subject underneath, quite often carries a message of transience. The Spanish master's subtlety with figures that are half-lit or bathed in shadow is notorious. But passages of this kind were probably thinly painted and have not always worn well. The two shadowy spectators at the back in the scene of *Joseph's Bloodied Coat* (No 25), for example, have lost some of the lines that convey the folds in their garments, over the years; although the dappled light in the painting as a whole looks marvellous after the recent cleaning. Some of the highlights on belt, buttons and folds in the suit of *Juan Martínez Montañés* (No 48), have disappeared in the course of time; while, in the Vienna portrait of *The Infanta Margarita* (No 74), which is still very fine, the puckered shadows and sheen in the blue silk at the left have become more tentative and random, it seems, less decisive and assured. Elsewhere, black velvet patterns on black material do not always stand out as clearly as they once did. The hatched and herring-bone design on the upper part of Pablo de Valladolid's jerkin (No 57), still delights the eye, but the diamonds on the coat of *Diego de Acedo, 'El Primo'* (No 55; here *Abb. 5 b*) are more difficult to read now than a hundred years ago. A few leaves have probably fallen from the lower branch of the tree, in the foreground of the *Landscape with St Anthony Abbot and St Paul the Hermit* (No 47), since photographic records were first made.

In some instances, of course, cleaning has compounded these intractable problems. In the case of the rather dubious *Philip IV* in a yellow leather jerkin (No 19), the king is losing his shadow and the folds in his crimson silk cape. His moustaches appear to have been shaved, and the slashes in his boots above the knee are less noticeable than they formerly were. The wheel and arm of his spurs have surrendered some spikes and highlights, while, at the bend in the leg, fragments of tasselled or pompommed garters come and go, like Wordsworth's rainbow. The catalogue is none too helpful about problems of this nature and the doubts about attributions that accompany them. The entries are usually content to line up the art historians, ancient and modern, in teams, and allow them to kick the ball of authenticity about by themselves, without much attempt to blow the whistle or referee the match. Yet an exhibition of this scale and calibre provides unparalleled opportunities for revising the canon and bringing all possible expertise to bear on original works, replicas, copies, and paintings by Velázquez's assistants or pupils. In this respect, one particularly misses the contribution of X-ray and pigment analysis, an area in which the staff of the Prado itself have recently built up an unrivalled fund of knowledge in relation to Velázquez's techniques at different periods. It would have been valuable to hear their assessment of several of the religious paintings from Spanish and foreign collections: *St Ildefonso receiving the Chasuble*, from Seville (No 11); *St Paul* (No 9), from Barcelona; and *St Thomas*, from Orléans (No 10). The opinion of the same staff would also have been welcome on paintings which are in some sense repetitions of authentic portraits, like the *Conde Duque de Olivares* (No 16), with its untypical clumsiness in the gold edging of the crimson cloth, or the brassy *Infanta Margarita* from the Alba collection (No 75). It was somewhat surprising to find at least one palpable copy masquerading as a possible preliminary sketch: the so-called *Study for the Head of Apollo* (No 24; *Abb. 7*). This must surely be a feminine variant on the figure in *Vulcan's Forge* (No 23; *Abb. 6*) by a later hand, with long hair trailing over the nape of the neck and peach bloom on the cheeks to soften Velázquez's original taut image.

In a number of cases, it would have been good to have the updated views of leading Velázquez scholars like Jonathan Brown, Enriqueta Harris, and José López-Rey. Even their published comments are not always satisfactorily exploited. Professor Brown's information about the relationship between two paintings of a *Man holding a Glass of Wine* and the *Geographer* (No 13), for instance, was unaccountably omitted from the catalogue, despite the fact that it emphasises the importance of X-ray evidence showing that the *Geographer* originally grasped a glass of wine himself. This naturally suggests that copies of the Rouen picture were made before Velázquez modified the painting, conceivably to suit the whim of some patron who preferred the philosophical vision of Democritus to the pleasures of a devotee of Bacchus. In the context of so many authentic works by Velázquez, less subtle compositions, which have sometimes been doubted, raise new uncertainties and deserve fresh judgements. Would Velázquez really have used such a blatant diagonal line as we find in *The Temptation of St Thomas Aquinas* (No 29), and would he have dropped such uneventful books on the floor in the foreground? Would the master of understatement and hint have painted the portrait of a man with such a prominent Calatrava cross on his chest as occurs in *Don Pedro de*

Barberana y Aparregui (No 32), and would he have split his background with so straight a line, where the wall joins the floor? Would such an inventive artist have littered a genuine portrait with so many *velazqueño* clichés? And would he have bisected and trisected the background of *Don Juan de Calabazas* (No 20), with such a hash of parallel lines and rectangles? Finally, one further doubt. Did the hand that made the basket on the wall in *The Old Woman frying eggs* (No 4) really make the much weaker version of the same model at the back of the *Mulatto Girl* (No 1)?

The best answers to questions such as these will probably be provided by a combination of technical and stylistic analysis, and an opportunity for both has been missed on the present occasion. Yet the exhibition's challenge is by no means confined to issues of attribution and school work. It also invites a sharper definition of Velázquez's character and artistic attitudes, and here much can be learned from the response of other artists to Velázquez's work, as Enriqueta Harris suggested at the end of her book (1982). It is not difficult, after all, to see what caught the eye of other painters in Velázquez paintings. The ability to convey a sense of space with light and shade rather than perspective lines, was certainly of the first importance, and strong shadows cast by figures, implying rather than defining the floor, pass from Velázquez to Manet and J. S. Sargent. They, like other artists, also valued those half-lit figures in the middle distance that give a magical depth to Velázquez's pictures with a minimum of brushstrokes. Painters were also, apparently, fascinated by his free handling of subsidiary detail. The wall that is concocted out of a few zones of light and shade, as in *Pablo de Valladolid* inspired Manet on a number of occasions, and notably in the portrait of Theodore Duret; and the brilliant gold shorthand for the elaborate finials on the back of the papal throne in *Innocent X*, won Francis Bacon's allegiance in the 1940s and 1950s. Bacon transferred the detail relatively intact to his nightmarish visions of Velázquez's Pope, where it provides a deceptively solid element in an unstable world. Velázquez's sense of the moment has also had an immense appeal, perhaps because of his avoidance of melodramatic or ritual gestures after the fashion of many Italian artists, and his preference for understatement and quieter devices: whites of egg solidifying in the pan; a hat or a piece of paper held in a hand; the crown of a man's head, bent over the balcony in the Villa Medici Gardens (No 64); or the mere hint of movement in wheel, horse, dog or boy, played off contrapuntally against the pedal point of a sleeping cat, dormant crockery, recumbent hound or reposeful Classical statuary. Finally, there is Velázquez's extraordinary ability to reach towards what lies outside the picture frame, notably with the help of a mirror which he uses, not as in Dutch art to show the main cast of the picture from other angles, but rather to show what is primarily off-screen. The mirror device, which he clearly employed in *Las Meninas*, and perhaps also in *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary* (No 2), though not in *Venus and Cupid* (No 63), was to be taken up in the nineteenth century by Manet and Whistler, and in the twentieth, by Anthony Whishaw.

Techniques such as these no doubt make a significant contribution to Velázquez's art. Yet much that seems typical of him is harder to define: the respect for his portrait subjects, for instance, regardless of their relative status. Velázquez seems loath to use buffoons and dwarfs to enhance the stature of princely patrons, as other artists did. He

gave the same attention to his slave assistant, *Juan de Pareja* (No 66), when he painted him, as he did to princes and popes. The clothes may carry a class message of course; and the setting may too, in some cases. And in some of the royal portraits Velázquez appears to have idealised the king's face. Yet, on the whole, he turns the same even regard on all the people he painted — on their domestic animals too, to judge from his cats and dogs. In short he finds honour in individuals of all the social classes, rather as Lope de Vega and Calderón do in some of their plays. The vexed question of symbolism in Velázquez's paintings is equally elusive. There was hardly room for symbolism at all in the common nineteenth-century vision of a realist Velázquez. Yet recent critics have begun to tease his imagery out. Naturally his paintings are full of the standard metaphors of his time. Those who stand by a table or under a canopy reveal their standing in the hierarchy in Velázquez as in other Spanish artists. Those who ride powerful mounts and hold the reins, also guide and direct the state and control their subjects. Inevitably the young Prince Balthasar Carlos needs riding lessons at an early age (No 41). Maleness is privileged in this equestrian world. Philip III and Philip IV ride fiery chargers, and the land and sea fall away beneath them to emphasise their eminence, and underline their power on land and sea, in the same way as in the battle pictures in the Hall of Realms of the Buen Retiro Palace for which these royal portraits were intended. Olivares rides a powerful steed too, and in other portraits has the gold key tucked into his belt, that signals his status as *llave dorada*, or Gentleman of the Royal Bedchamber, close to the person of the king himself. The queens, on the other hand, are given an easier ride. Margarita of Austria and Isabel of France sit side-saddle on a pair of docile dobbins, and do not hold a particularly high place in relation to the landscape behind them. Then hunting has a metaphoric value too, since it was seen as a fitting relaxation for warrior princes, who were expected to command armies as well as their subjects. It may well be for this reason that Velázquez painted *Mars*, the god of war, without his armour on, for the royal hunting-lodge, the Torre de la Parada (No 51). In Velázquez, as in other artists, metaphor is most evident in religious paintings, where light itself is traditionally symbolic. Velázquez normally chooses to make his source of light reasonably realistic (although Christ and Apollo have auras round their heads), but he makes it fall most strongly on the Christ child in *The Adoration of the Magi* (No 8), and illuminates the figure of the Virgin Mary next in intensity. A similar hierarchy of light operates in *Las Meninas*, in the political sphere.

Certain paintings by Velázquez have proved richer in symbolic overtones. Jonathan Brown has shown the importance of the status of art as a topic within *Las Meninas* and *The Fable of Arachne*. And Steven Orso has added some interesting detail about the paintings on the walls at the back in the first of these two paintings. John F. Moffitt has written on the equestrian portraits, and intriguingly suggested a spiritual interpretation of *The Waterseller of Seville* (No 3). Yet there is no reference to this line of investigation in the catalogue notes. All the same, since knowledge of symbols enhanced the status of the artist in Spain in Velázquez's time, he had a good motive for employing symbolism. However, the ability to draw from nature and create works of art that were independent and original, and not inspired by other artists, was a source of status too. There may well have been more status in Velázquez's draughtsmanship than in his

metaphors. Certainly his art seems to react against a metaphor-within-metaphor approach, of the kind that placed symbolic colour on the top of symbolic subject matter, for instance, in the manner of El Greco. And for this reason, it is not surprising that the creator of the most elaborate metaphors in seventeenth-century Spain, whom Velázquez painted with great insight and authority as a young man — *Don Luis de Góngora* (No 12) — should have admired El Greco as an artist, whereas his poetical adversary, Francisco de Quevedo, enamoured of Classical clarity, direct rather than obscure metaphors, and witty conceits, admired Velázquez.

If the changing taste in metaphor, the status of the artist, and court patronage — which gave rise to particular kinds of Velázquez portrait (including court dwarfs and entertainers) and the occasional political picture such as *The Surrender of Breda* — are in part responsible for the character of Velázquez's art, they do not explain its continued appeal or the queues at the Prado's doors. Velázquez must provide some mysterious motivation of his own to add to the sense of national pride, or the social acceptability of queuing for art, which no doubt put some people in line. Yet Velázquez is far from universal in his appeal. Many people have preferred the passionate involvement of Goya with the world he depicted and criticised, or, like Meier-Graefe in his *Spanische Reise*, felt that El Greco's art reached parts that Velázquez could not reach, telling you more about the artist's attitudes and feelings. But if the eighteenth-century theorists were right to think that the pleasures of art were also those of the imagination, then Velázquez has as much as any artist to offer. He does not plant fantastic images before us, as Goya did. Yet he compels the spectator to visualise what is not in front of his eyes as well as what is. The expressions of Mercury and Argos, which we cannot see and have to deduce from the pose and repose of their respective bodies (*Abb. 5 a*); the compelling quality and variety of the faces looking at the ground in *The Surrender of Breda*, which we only half glimpse; the King and Queen insubstantially reflected in the mirror alongside the empty back of a canvas on which Velázquez paints a picture we cannot see, in *Las Meninas*: all this keeps the imagination endlessly active. Such things, together with the absent floors and walls, the strange allusive brushstrokes, and that sense of the temporary that has led the Mexican poet Octavio Paz to call Velázquez 'a jailer of Time', seem touchstones of his extraordinary genius.

Nigel Glendinning

EUROPÄISCHE MALEREI DES BAROCK AUS DEM NATIONALMUSEUM IN WARSCHAU

Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich-Museum 24. 11. 1988 bis 29. 1. 1989 — Utrecht, Centraal Museum 18. 3. bis 7. 5. 1989 — Köln, Wallraf-Richartz-Museum 19. 7. bis 18. 10. 1989 — München, Alte Pinakothek 3. 11. 1989 bis 14. 1. 1990.
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Von November 1988 bis Januar 1990 war nacheinander in Braunschweig, Utrecht, Köln und München eine hochrangige Auswahl von 65 Gemälden des 17. und 18. Jahr-