**Diego Velázquez’s View on Status Through *Las Meninas***

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The culmination of Diego Velázquez’s artistic works, *Las Meninas*, was completed in 1656 and is one of the most written about paintings in the world. Much of what has been written about *Las Meninas* relates to how information about Velázquez helps generate a better understanding of the painting, opposed to how one’s interpretation of the painting can yield a better understanding of Velázquez. There is no traditional drama from myth or the bible in *Las Meninas*, opposed to those of typical artworks from the seventeenth century. Instead, Velázquez has set a scene in which multiple subjects stand by as a painter works; there is no arguably no drama at all. Without a dramatic reference to guide the viewer’s thought process, we are left with nothing but the focal points the artist curates to investigate the piece.

Consequently, the painting forces the viewer to ask questions that ultimately relate back to Velázquez himself, such as: Is Velázquez making a statement about status? Why did Velázquez want himself in the painting? Why would Velázquez even want the viewer to be asking questions? By understanding the intricacies Velázquez intentionally embedded in *Las Meninas*, one can infer that Velázquez was concerned about status and believed he was important enough to be a vital part of the painting.

By creating three different centers in the painting, Velazquez deliberately makes pinpointing the painting’s center impossible. Las Meninas was revolutionary because Velázquez

wanted to engage the viewers and ensure that time was spent interpreting the painting, and he did so by using perspective carefully and adding elements of vagueness. Many patterns or details in *Las Meninas* can be uncovered when spending time with the painting, making it seem like Velázquez wanted the viewer to look for these things. For example, a trick Velázquez plays on the viewer is what the mirror is actually reflecting. One possibility is that the viewer is being shown what Velázquez is painting which would imply that the king and queen are seated somewhere in the room as models. The other is that the mirror is reflecting the king and queen themselves, and the subject of the painting is more of a mystery. Velázquez crafted these uncertainties within Las Meninas in order to turn the act of observing art from passive to active and engaging

One of the most notorious debates about the interpretation of Las Meninas is the mirror and whether it is the focal point of the painting or not. Velázquez has created three centers: the infanta, the man in the doorway, and the mirror. The infanta is the visual center since she is right around the center of the painting, so it is the most conventional interpretation of what the focal point of a painting would be. However, her being slightly off-centered still contributes to the vagueness of what exactly the focal point of *Las Meninas* is. The next most obvious focal point in a painting would be where its lines of perspective meet, since it is where the eye would be directed. In *Las Meninas*, the man in the doorway is the vanishing point of the painting, specifically right where his hand is. “In Vélazquez’s painting, the receding lines converge on Nieto’s hand. It is with this hand that controls perspective and the curtain that Vélazquez closes his painting.”[[1]](#footnote-0) Lastly, the mirror reflecting an image of the king and queen is in the middle of the back wall, evenly between the two doorways and centered underneath the two paintings above;

these are very notable and intentional decisions Velázquez made. Additionally, Velázquez added bright highlights around the rim of the mirror to contrast it against the dark wall, and to confirm that it is a mirror and not a painting. The creation of these three centers competing with each other must have been intentional for a painter as seasoned as Velázquez, meaning that he wanted the viewer to struggle with the idea of no center, three centers, or one general area of focus. It is up to the viewer to decide what they think the focal point is and why.

With no immediate focal point, the viewer is forced to decide which figures in the painting are more important than others; an immediate thought would be their status. The most common argument is that the infanta, the king's five-year-old daughter, is the most important person in the painting. Margaret Theresa was the first daughter of King Philip IV and his second wife, Mariana of Austria. The infanta’s dress is painted the brightest and makes her stand out from the darker colors in the painting. Next to the infanta are two ladies in waiting who were her personal assistants. Isabel de Velasco is depicted on the left offering the infanta a drink, and María Agustina Sarmiento de Sotomayor is on the right beginning to curtsy. In the lower right hand corner, two dwarfs stand to the side of the infanta, Mari Bárbola meeting the viewer’s gaze and Nicolás Pertusato teasing the sleeping dog with his foot. Behind them are the infanta’s chaperone and a bodyguard in the middle of a conversation. In the very back, presumably even in a different room, Don José Nieto Velázquez, the queen’s chamberlain, holds up a curtain. Velázquez’s self portrait is spotted when looking to the left, and he depicts himself pausing and looking past what he is painting and at the viewer. It may seem like these are all the figures that can be spotted, but there are two more reflected in a mirror on the back wall: King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. Velázquez has placed a wide range of people from a chaperone to a king in the same space.

By intentionally placing people with a wide variety of social statuses in the same scene, Velázquez forces the viewer to consider how status is reflected in the painting. The idea of multiple people of different statuses depicted in a painting together evokes the thought that they are all equals. However, the fact that some figures are placed further away from the foreground than others can result in the opposite thought: the people closest to the viewer must be the most important. Nevertheless, both of these scenarios make the viewer think about the role status plays in the painting. Velázquez also seems to be interested in the idea of scale since there are many patterns relating to it in the painting.

Part of Velázquez’s statement of status is about the subjectivity of it. When looking at the figures closest to the foreground, they all look around the same height and size; these figures are the kneeling lady in waiting, the infanta, and the two dwarfs. This is very interesting because Velázquez is depicting them similarly, but their statuses and how society viewed them are completely different. One could infer that he is making a statement about how status is very subjective and that small differences and coincidence lead to completely different social statuses. Additionally, Velázquez depicts the dwarfs in a respectable manner which was much different from how dwarfs were usually treated with little respect in the 1600’s. For example, Mari Bárbola is seen standing tall, and also meets the eye of the viewer with a calm and composed gaze. This shows that Velázquez had a level of respect for the dwarfs, despite how society viewed them. By bringing all these different people of different statuses into *Las Meninas* and obfuscating the focal point, perhaps Velázquez was making a statement that high levels of respect were not only meant for royals. After all, he even placed the king and queen in the same room as all the other figures. Even if the monarchs only appear as a reflection, Velázquez implies that each person in the painting was worthy enough to be placed and associated with the king and

queen. Status was also an important idea to Velázquez himself and could explain why he wanted himself in *Las Meninas.*

Velázquez used *Las Meninas* to promote his own status by including himself in the painting. In the 1600s, painting was not considered a noble profession, and despite Velázquez’s high position for an artist, he was still affected by prejudice against painters. He had been asked to pay a tax for his work called the alcabala, putting him on the same level as tailors or shoemakers. This was one of the driving factors for Velázquez to create such a masterpiece, to prove not just his own nobility, but that of all artists. In addition, he had wanted to become a knight and to do so as an artist, he needed to do something exceptional. He could not simply ask the king to grant him knighthood, so he created *Las Meninas*. Velázquez implies the king’s presence in the painting with the mirror, and perspective proves the mirror should reflect what Velázquez depicts himself painting. From this it is inferred that the monarchs are in the room with Velázquez because he technically needed the king and queen in the room as models to paint them. By placing himself in a painting with royalty, Velázquez had to at least somewhat believe he was of important status in order to paint himself in this manner. Additionally, he could have easily depicted himself at work with some of his face obstructed, but he made the choice to paint himself standing tall and looking directly at the viewer. “The appearance of the independent self-portrait questions the role of the patron.”[[2]](#footnote-1)

It is also important to take in account Velázquez’s desire to become a knight when discussing his views on status. Clearly, Velázquez wanted a lasting legacy because he made his presence in *Las Meninas* noticed and used the painting as part of his campaign for knighthood. As stated before, he could have easily painted himself in a less noticeable manner, but he chose not to. “In order to be seen, the painter must move away from his work. Vélazquez’s attitude and

the posture of his head confirm the point.”[[3]](#footnote-2) This relates back to how he viewed himself and his own importance, high enough so to campaign for knighthood, and would have contributed to why he would want himself to be noticed in this painting.

Over the years, Velázquez had built himself up into holding four positions on the Spanish Royal Court. His most important role was aposentador, chamberlain of the palace. This role gave him a very good income and he was in charge of furniture, cleanliness, and arranging lodging for the king when traveling.[[4]](#footnote-3) This is reflected in Las Meninas through the key on his waist. “The key worn by Velàzquez even as he paints is thus not only a badge of high office, but also the token of the special relationship between the painter and the king.”[[5]](#footnote-4) Velázquez, however, still wanted to

become a knight and used *Las Meninas* as a means of getting there. Velázquez emphasizes his role in the Spanish Court by depicting him doing his job as court painter, and by doing so, he also puts importance on his role as painter and how he is technically irreplaceable. In the end, his pursuit for knighthood was ended in 1658 when he was made a Knight of Santiago, which can be seen from the red cross on his self portrait added after the initial completion of the painting.

*Las Meninas* provides insight on Velázquez’s personal opinions on status in respect to society as a whole, as well as for himself. He used the painting to advocate for his own status, but also for the worth of other people on the Spanish Court. Not only was Velázquez able to create a technical masterpiece, he was also able to introduce modern ideas like symbolism and pattern to the 17th century art world, all while pursuing his own interest of achieving knighthood. *Las Meninas* stands out from the rest of Velázquez’s life works and explores ideas ahead of its time, allowing for many questions and potential answers to be drawn. The intricacies

and areas of interpretation Velazquez embedded into the painting have kept discussion about *Las Meninas* alive for almost four centuries after its creation. The painting provides perspective on life within the seventeenth century Spanish Royal Court, social statuses at the time, Velázquez himself, and even how women were perceived by society. *Las Meninas* is not only one of the art world’s greatest masterpieces, but a time capsule created for the viewer by Velázquez.

**Bibliography**

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1. Stoichita, Victor I. “The Self-Aware Image. an Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting, 1997.” (The Burlington Magazine, 2015) 279. [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Stoichita, 236. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Stoichita, 276. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. Brown, Jonathan. “Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting by Jonathan Brown.” (Princeton University Press, 1978) 95. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
5. Brown, 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)