

Study and report on
THE LADIES IN WAITING
by
DIEGO VELAZQUEZ

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of duty

Humanities 101
IdaRose Hall

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A print of this picture was given to me as a gift by my Neice and Nephew when they returned recently from a semester abroad in Spain. Since I was not familiar with the painting or the painter, I chose to write this paper 'on The Ladies in Waiting' by Diego Velazquez.

A brief Historical Note: Velazquez was born 6 June, 1599 in Seville, Spain. As a young boy he was apprenticed to the artist Francisco Pacheco, who was always a second father to the artist. At nineteen he married Pacheco's daughter. In an age of generally loose morals, there is no indication that he was ever unfaithful to her, although he probably had plenty of opportunity while serving in the royal court of Phillip II. It attests to his general good character, that he survived all the court intrigues to remain the court painter for Phillip from 1626 until his death in 1660.

At the time Velazquez started painting there had been a general turning away from the "perfect" painting of artists like Raphael. Another group of artists, Michaelangelo, Tintoretto, Veronese, and Titian (who seems to have influenced Valazquez considerably) had a confidence and completeness that seemed equally intolerable. Perfection and completeness no longer corresponded to the reality of the age. Both Italy and Spain were practically bankrupt. The era of dissolution had set in. Velazquez seems to be intermediate between the work of The above Artists and the impressionists although some of the impressionists claimed him.¹

"The Ladies in Waiting" was painted towards the end of Valazquez's career. It is 3.18 x 2.76 meters (10.4 x 9.1 feet) in size. At the Prado it is given a whole room to itself. Reviewers tend to become rapturous in describing the picture. White says, "He is the painter of painters", Luca Giorano called the picture "The theology of painting", A plaque on the frame of the picture in the Prado calls it "The culminating work of universal art." During his life, Velazquez painted only 200 paintings, which was small in comparison to the great output of other artists contemporary with him. He was a perfectionist and one of art's great "touchers-up". Working in the court as he did, he had access and storage for all his paintings and was constantly adding and subtracting from his work. Sometimes this is ill-disguised and very easily discerned in his work.

The picture contains 12 figures: The painter himself, An image of the King and Queen in a mirror on the back wall of the painting, the Infanta, two ladies in waiting, both young girls, a female dwarf, and a male dwarf that looks like a young boy and who I supposed to be the brother to the Infanta before doing research on the picture. In the rear, silhouetted against an open door is the head of the royal tapestry factory, and behind the dwarf's a woman and a man who seem to be in the robes of the Catholic Church. In the front right corner of the picture is a large dog.

1. Diego Velazquez, Painter and Courtier, by Jon Machip White

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On the front of the painter's doublet is a scarlet cross. The scarlet order of Santiago, which honor was awarded the artist just before his death, and which was painted into the picture by order of the King after Velasquez's death. My husband deduced that the artist was left handed, as the picture is painted as a reflection of the entire group in a huge mirror. There are lines running faintly down the picture, which may indicate where the canvas was joined or where the mirrors were joined. These may not be too evident in the painting itself, and may have shown up in the print.

Medium. Oil. On canvas. White says that Velazquez's color technique can be best appreciated in Spain where there is the greatest collection of his work and where the clear air and the dry spanish sunshine ^{has} preserved the paintings much better than some of his works which appear in museums in England, for instance, where they have had to lay down layers of varnish to preserve the paintings from the damp climate.

Color: This was one of the features of the painting which interested me the most. When Velazquez first started painting his backgrounds were very dark, but as he progressed in his life he lightened his backgrounds considerably. In this picture, painted in the interior of the palace where I am certain the light was less than desirable, he has really created a warm and delightful atmosphere for the picture. The general tones are brown, but they have so much blacks, oranges, and greens, etc, in subtle colorings that is difficult to pinpoint any exact color. There are several paintings shown on the rear wall, which are of the same general shadings as the walls and celings, but which are indistinguishable in the print. In the painting itself, the forms may be distinguishable, but I hope not, because I think it would take away from the figures in the picture. Wright lists three focal points-- The infanta, the Painter and the mirrored reflections above and to the left of the infanta of her parents. My own eye was drawn more to the silhouetted figure on the stairs in the rear of the picture. for the third focal point.

Velazquez uses touches of red for accents in his picture. There are reds in the flower the infanta is wearing. Red on the blazer of the artist and in his palette. Red ribbons on the wrists of one of the ladies in waiting, and a red curtain in the reflection of the King and Queen. The male dwarf is wearing a red doublet and vest. These are accented by reds in the shadows ^{beside him} by the dwarf, and again picked up in the browns of the background, especially behind the infanta.

I had never thought of it before, but White cannot be just the background it must be painted onto the canvas. In the picture, there are whites in almost all the clothing of the persons in the picture to one degree or another, but nowhere is there the luminous white of the infanta's dress. Her dress is a brocade and is highlighted by subtle yellows, pinks and lavenders in very subtle hues, which are hardly noticed, but come out "white" It would be interesting to see how he brushed these on to achieve the color effect he does achieve. Her hair is light blond, flowing, and giving almost a "halo" effect to the Princess's face.

All the three commentaries which I read on this picture mentioned Velazquez's mastery of the use of "black". I presume he almost had to, ^{because this is a masterpiece} because most of the men's clothing of the period were blacks, and because of the bankrupt condition of the King's treasury it was almost a sin to wear ostentatious clothing, and there were officers authorized to go around scissoring "off" any ornate ruffs or velvets worn by individuals. In this picture you can tell the difference between the black materials. The female dwarf seems to have a velvet dress, while the kneeling lady in waiting has a black skirt which seems to be tafetta or satin. The painters outfit is black also but has no luminescence except on the sleeves. The Priest or servant in the background is also almost entirely in black, but there is enough brown in the black that he seems to recede into the background.

Light: There seems to be a shaft of light which illuminates the Infanta. It is reflected into the faces of the maids and the other members of the picture from the right side of the picture, but light also comes from the back and from the top. I am sure that the room in which he painted this picture was probably ill-lighted like most of the castles of the time. I presume that the light that illuminates this picture so well was painted in by the artist from his own imagination. The Princess's face is entirely illumined by this light and her whole being seems to "shine".

It is in the play of light that one senses the reverence which the artist held for the royal family. He instills even this small child (not more than four or five) with a royal presence. (I wondered if she were always decked out in this stiff a clothing--if so, how did she play as a child should be able to play.) This is further portrayed by the angles which he places the waiting ladies in. The one on the right is bowing on an angle towards the princess, and the one on a left is kneeling and offering her a drink. Their bodies intersect on an angle which meets above the head of the princess, if you drew a visual line. The angle of the bodies also tends to "frame" the princess. My first impression was that the infanta was a "haughty" and spoiled child, but after looking at it for awhile I decided that he had put as much "humanity" into the picture as he probably could bring himself to. The humanity creeps in from the playful jostling of the male dwarf of the big, lazing dog in the front right corner of the painting.

Volume: Velazquez had other duties at court besides being court painter. He had to stage all the pagentry of the court. Also he was a consultant on all the building of the period by the king. This activity enhanced the natural abilities of the artist in a "perspective" sense, I am sure. He achieves depth, height, etc from his use of the receding clumnar windows at the right and by the rectangular panels to the rear of the picture. The figure silouhettied against an open door, standing on stairs leading to another level also give an illusion of depth. He has achieved height by placing all his characters in the bottom of the picture, thus giving the illusion of the drama going on in a room of very high ceilings, which was probably the case.

He also employed the use of angles to denote motion and strength. The angles of the "maids" bodies, already mentioned, *for instance.*

These are all diagonal lines. Diagonal lines also appear in the 45 degree angle at which he holds his paint brush, and in the angle of the leg of the male dwarf jostling the dog, and in the standing stance of the man silhouetted against the open-doorway in the back of the picture. In the reflected picture of the King and Queen is a diagonal line. The edge of the canvas is also on a diagonal line and is lighted brightly.

In a group as large as the one included in the picture, balance is important, and there is the problem of arrangement so that the "actors" are not just lined up as in the standard "family" photograph. He places the central figure of the Infanta to the left of center towards the painter, which balances the larger group to the right of the picture.

There are some unanswered questions? Did the painter really paint from their mirrored images in a large mirror? Or did he paint this from his imagination of the group as mirrored? If the picture was a mirror-image, then the artist was left handed. Was he?

I think I prefer the earlier pictures of the artist. Before he went to court he painted typical scenes of the countryside. "The Water Carrier", and "The old Cook" are examples of this. His "Christ at the Column" has moved me more than any of the "crucifixion" paintings which I have seen. I wonder if he would not have been more famous if he had not become the Court artist? Certainly his life would have been harder from an economic standpoint.

As a result of this study, I think I could recognize his work if I saw it again. Especially his work while at court. When I have the time I would like to do this with other artists.