

## *Original Paper*

# A Brief Discussion on the Object of Expression in Diego Velasquez's Las Meninas

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### **Abstract**

*Las Meninas is a painting by Spanish painter Diego Velasquez painted in 1656. The composition of the painting is very complex, consisting of nine people, a dog, mirror reflections of the king and queen, paintings on the wall, etc. While among them, which is the main object depicted by the painter, who is the hero of the painting, the discussion on this issue has been the research object of experts all the time. The author refers to the historical background, painting methods, color application and light treatment of the painter, and also refers to the analysis by Michel Foucault and Daniel Arasse, to get a brief discussion of the object expressed in this painting.*

### **Keywords**

*Las Meninas, Michel Foucault, Daniel Arasse, object of expression*

Las Meninas is one of Spanish painter Diego Velazquez's greatest paintings and one of the most widely analyzed works of Western painting. Diego Velasquez is not only a famous Baroque painter, but also a great master of painting who has aristocratic temperament. After being introduced by a count, he became Spain's court painter and lived in the palace of Madrid. He developed a close friendship with the king and often produced portraits for him. Las Meninas is just a famous masterpiece he drew in 1656 in request of the king. The height of it is up to 3 meters, each object in this painting is just in the same physical size. It shows what the daily life liked in the palace: In the quite palace, Velasquez was drawing a couple portrait for the king and his wife. At that moment, the princess and her maids happened to come into the painting room. This painting has two characteristics: the first one is the custom style. It describes the king's life from an interesting insight; the second one is that the painter broke the established principles of creating the Court portrait. He put the King and his wife in a secondary position, instead of putting them in the middle of the picture in the traditional way. In fact, in his time, this composition is very bold,

more or less a little casual. His portrait of this approach is a kind of court reforms. The on-screen characters are no longer a rigid arrangement, but in a state of nature as far as possible. Sophisticated dynastic vision is emphasized in this painting. Light and shadow plays an important role in it. This painting is undoubtedly a very great work, on the artistic quality. However, as long as you walk into this piece of masterpiece, various issues will follow. First of all, as a general habit of appreciation, we would firstly have such a question, who is the hero in this painting? The painter wants us to see whose face? Is the *las meninas* described in the subject, or the little princess whom the light focuses on? Is the aristocratic painter who are wearing a huge medal, or the king couple who appear in the mirror? Maybe it is the dwarf female with a serious expression, or the person in black who is standing aside a curtain in the background and ready to leave but is attracted to something happening?

For me, the first character I notice is the little princess who are dressed in white in the front of the room. She just possesses the middle point of the crowd. Cause her dress is in a light color, which has a strong visual tension. And it just creates a visual association with the white smock that the two maids beside her are wearing. All these things create a band of light with her in the center. These things lead us to treat the little princess as the hero of this picture easily with preconceptions. However, we'll soon realize that we are misguided by the painter who makes use of our habit of appreciation and plays a vision game with us. Cause the little princess is not the object of all the sights point to. So the hero of this painting is not the princess, and more cannot be the two maids who are standing at her side.

The most interesting is that Velazquez made his own arrangement in the painting. He was holding a palette, standing after a huge drawing board, spiritedly and proudly. It even makes us treat this picture as his own portrait. He is also trying to highlight the wearing medal in his chest, which he was once dreaming of owning, for it is a signal of his high position. In the picture he is so young, but in fact, he was over his sixtieth year at that moment. Many modern researchers believe it was the work of an elderly, confident genius. In particular, the San Diego Medal on his chest was so striking that one had to believe it might be the hero the artist wanted to show. But history turns out that the medal was added on Velazquez's chest by Philip IV as a tribute to his memory when the work was restored right after his death in 1660. Therefore, this conjecture is not untenable.

Since the artist is not the hero of this painting, then the king and his wife who stood in front of him and being reflected in the mirror should be object of this painting. However, this is after all only an assumption that we make from our common sense. For the king couple themselves do not appear directly in the painting, instead, the reader ourselves are inevitable placed in the position that belongs to them. For this view, Michel Foucault in *Words and Things—An Archaeology of Human Sciences*, pointed out that, “We must pretend that we do not know who or what is reflected in the mysterious mirror and question about the significance of the existence of this reflection” (1966). “When looking straightly across the screen, the subject and the object, the audience and the model, numerous swap roles”. So, the painting becomes a “classic representation of the appearance”, which points to “the nature of emptiness” “the collapse of the basis of similarity” “cancellation of the main body” and so on. On

balance, this is a space with open and free democracy. Foucault's idea is based on the visual order that he established. Based on Foucault's this perspective, when we look at the painting, the visual center that we notice at first is the Princess and the *las meninas*. As we can see, the Princess is watching something, but we do not know what it really is; but it's obvious that she is also seen by the two maids. While the maids and the Princess is just what we are watching in response. We can call it the first group of multiple gaze. Then, let's take a deep look at this picture. You can find that the painter who is standing behind the Princess and her maids, is taking a look at something too. What is the object, we can't tell, but we can see that he himself is not only read by that mysterious thing, but also watched by us. This is the second group of multiple gaze. If we make a further look at this picture, we can find the individual who is standing at the door against the background. He is looking at these two sets of gaze from the opposite direction to ours. Furthermore, he is also seen by two different sight from us and the one on whom the painter is concentrating. This is the third group of multi-gaze. Finally, we can see a mirror in the painting and find that the small princess, the painter and the people at the door may all look at the people who are reflected in the mirror. And in response, the one is also looking at them. This is the fourth group of multiple gaze. Within each group, we can find the interaction between to see and be seen. And it also has this kind of interaction between these four groups. From Foucault's view, the interaction relationship between all of these things are reproduced in order to obtain a visual relationship, namely, the internal structure of gaze.

In other words, in Foucault's view, this is a painting about painting. It is about to see and be seen and also about staring and reproducing on the painting. From it we can deconstruct staring and reproducing. At this level, after Foucault's interpretation, Velazquez's *Las Meninas* is no longer merely a painting of realism style.

Relative to Foucault's point of view, Daniel Arasse criticized Foucault of his removal of the historical background of *Las Meninas*. He pointed that Foucault had made this masterpiece democratization and museum-oriented, which is opposite to the painter's original aim. Arasse even made a comprehensive study into the tortuous history of the painting, noting that it was changed from a painting called *Family Portrait*. But whatever *Family Portrait* or *LAS MENINAS*, both were made by the artists to adapt to the needs of the political situation in the royal family. After made a very detailed analysis to the painting scene (including the character's eyes), Arasse said, through the mirror, the king becomes the one who cannot see nothing: the eyes of every character are towards the king. He is looking at everyone present in the office of his own Summer Palace. He is also watching them from the background of the screen. In fact, this outstanding performance emphasizes that the king possesses a supreme absolute position in the dynasty. In a conclusion, his view is that the king couple is the object expression of the painting.

I am more agree with this view. Firstly, the analysis of a painter's work cannot be divorced from his own identity and the historical environment. As it was described at the beginning of the article. Velasquez is the most prominent realism painter in the 17th-century in Spain. He made his way from a dilapidated Zeilya family to the palace, and established a deep and lasting friendship with the king. Undoubtedly,

Philip IV was his most respected and admired object. As you can see, what his works show is all about aristocratic elegance and dignity. What's more, in this painting, according to the historical data, all the images contained in it are real people, not a fictional image. In other words, this is a piece of more than one character's plot portrait. All the evidence show that the painter got his inspiration from the typical real life in the palace. And it also fully demonstrates the realism skill of this great painter. We can even say that he did not belong to the Baroque painters' team, but was more interested in the principles of realism. That's why he got the praise as "the painter of truth".

At the same time, although making a living as a court painter, Velasquez was not just blind to curry favor with the power. The great artist was always persistent in the pursuit of artistic freedom in his heart. Especially in his later years, he had almost painted anything, and also wanted to draw a number of different things in order to achieve the reform of art. Through his inheritance and improvement of Titian, he made the natural patterns and colors together. In order to emphasize the noble image of the supreme king and his wife, he had to put them in the mirror, so that they can examine other people in the painting from two directions-before and after. And the one being examined even includes us standing between them and the mirror. Fortunately, Philip IV was a magnanimous monarch. So even if sometimes he's chief artist created a number of adventurous works with adventure spirit, he was also willing to accept. All these reasons lead to the wide spread of *Las Meninas* through ages. Diego Velasquez was hailed as one of the most outstanding representatives of Spain's golden age, has been the pursuit of a number of artists of future generations.

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