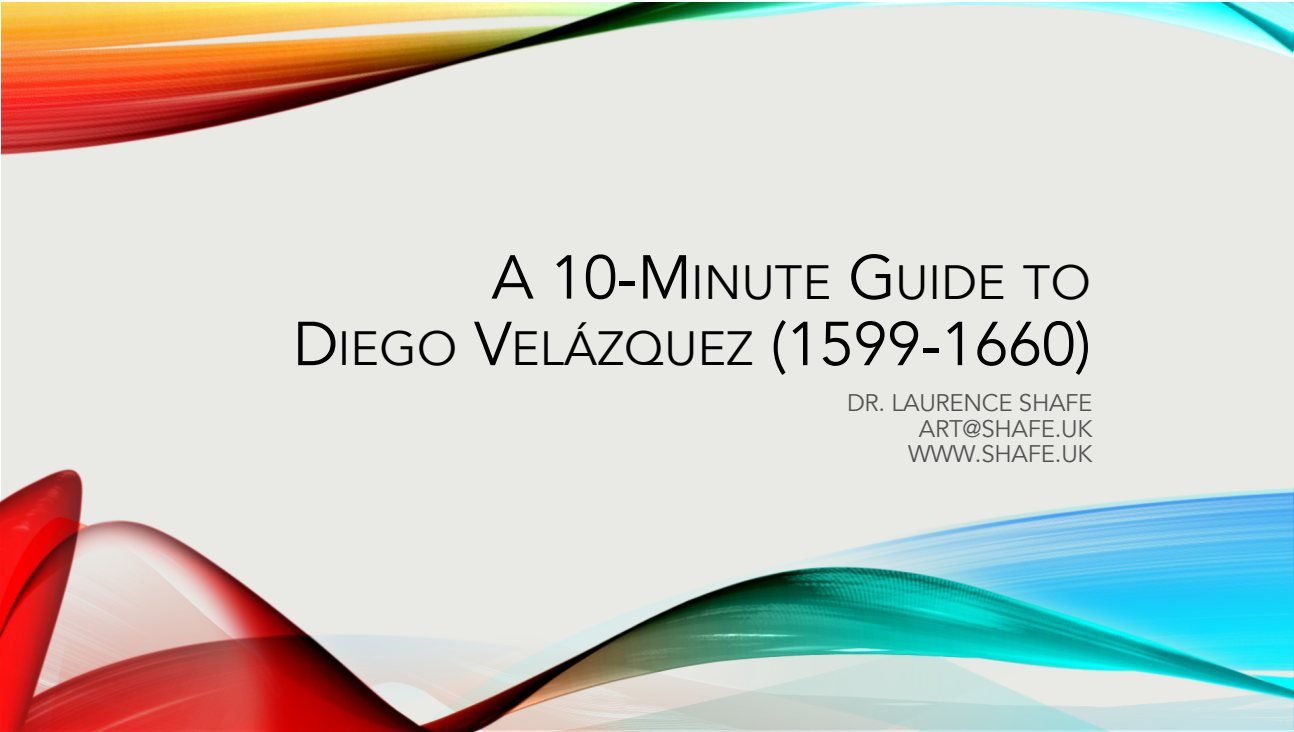




A 10-MINUTE GUIDE TO DIEGO VELÁZQUEZ (1599-1660)

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE
ART@SHAFE.UK
WWW.SHAFE.UK

- You have probably seen works by these artists individually and you may have been to talks or watched a TV programme describing them. This talk is to put each artists in context and situate them within what is called the 'Spanish Golden Age'.
- **The Spanish Golden Age (16th and 17th centuries, or more narrowly 1556-1659)**
 - The Spanish Golden Age of art and literature was **funded by the exploitation** of the constant stream of gold and silver from South America. Although this seemed an inexhaustible source of wealth it led to rampant inflation. Spain became the most important power on the Continent and **Spanish Habsburg court culture became the model** for courts across Europe with its **formal severity, icy reserve and strict control of the emotions**.
 - Spaniards travelled extensively in Europe **and favoured Flemish artists** over Spanish artists so many Flemish artists lived and worked in Spain. **Charles I of Spain** (V of the Holy Roman Emperor) was **born in Flanders** (in 1500) and spent more time in his European possessions than in Spain. **His son, Philip II** (r. 1556-98) **travelled widely in Europe** with his father before settling down in Madrid in 1561. They and many others visiting Flanders and Italy, such as Castilian wool merchants, became seen in Spain as trend setters whose tastes had been refined by their experiences.
 - **The defeat of Muslim Spain in 1492, and the discovery of America** in the same year, ensured that there would be **financial resources to fund literature**,

architecture, music, sculpture and painting. Philip II was a leading **supporter of the arts** and during his reign the arts flourished. Philip II was **King of England from 1554 to 1558.** Following his return to Spain he commissioned **El Escorial**, the massive palace cum mausoleum (built between 1563-84), about 30 miles north of Madrid and renovated the Real Alcázar ('Royal Fortress') in Madrid to store his large collection of paintings. The building was destroyed by fire in 1734 with 500 paintings and rebuilt as the present Royal Palace of Madrid between 1738 and 1764. **Madrid became the capital in 1606 when Philip II moved his court there from Toledo. Seville remained the largest city economically.** The two largest regions were **Castile and Aragon** which were united in 1469 by the marriage of Isabella and Ferdinand. Other regions such as Catalonia, the Basque lands and Navarra retained their own institutions and privileges.

- There were outstanding Spanish achievements in a wide range of activities including politics, literature, art, sculpture, architecture, theology, humanities, philosophy and law. **The Catholic Church** and its related monasteries, convents, and abbeys were the **wealthiest institutions in the country**, and were able to commission a huge supply of paintings to fill the many buildings they owned. This must be set against the brutal reign of the Spanish Inquisition which was formed in 1478. It was a time of extreme day-to-day violence and during its reign, many people were burnt in front of crowds in the streets simply for their beliefs. In America tens of millions died within the first hundred years of colonial rule from mistreatment and disease.
- The split in Christianity, known as the **Reformation** is dated to either the publication of the **Ninety-Five Theses by Martin Luther in 1517** or the Edict of Worms in 1521 which banned the teaching of Luther. It was followed by the **Counter-Reformation** which began with the **Council of Trent** (1545–1563) and largely ended with the conclusion of the European wars of religion in 1648. The Counter-Reformation included the expulsion of Protestants, the **confiscation of Protestant children** in order to bring them up as Catholics, heresy trials and burning at the stake, and the founding of new religious orders. **In Spain the mystics were major figures** of the Counter-Reformation who wished to restructure the church to renew it spiritually. They attempted to express in words and paintings their

experience of a **mystical communion with Christ**. In addition, the Council of Trent ruled that art was to provide an accurate representation of the Bible and

- *“...every superstition shall be removed ... all lasciviousness be avoided; in such wise that figures shall not be painted or adorned with a beauty exciting to lust... there be nothing seen that is disorderly, or that is unbecomingly or confusedly arranged, nothing that is profane, nothing indecorous, seeing that holiness becometh the house of God.”*
- The Spanish Golden Age ended with the Treaty of the Pyrenees between Philip IV of Spain and Louis XIV of France.
- Since the 16th century Spain **banned the import of books** to try to suppress Protestant ideas however, by 1800 it had lost its vast empire and was lagged behind other European countries in adopting the new science and technologies that led to the Industrial Revolution.

Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Self-portrait*, c. 1650, 45 x 38 cm, Museu de Belles Arts de València



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Self-portrait*, c. 1650, 45 x 38 cm, Museu de Belles Arts de València

- **Diego Velázquez (1599-1660)**, was born in Saville. His grandparents had moved from Portugal and were tradespeople, possibly converts from Judaism. This is relevant as when he was **knighthed in 1658 he claimed descent from lesser nobility**.
- At a young age he was taught languages and philosophy and showed an early gift for art so when he was 11 or 12 his parents sent him to study with Francisco Pacheco for the next five or six years.
- In 1618 he married his teacher's daughter Juana Pacheco and by the the age of 21 his reputation was assured. She bore him two daughters although one died in infancy.
- He became court painter and friend of the king, Philip IV, who would sit and watch him paint. Velázquez was responsible to the king's collection and he acquired paintings from all the great artists. The collection at the Prado was largely acquired by Velázquez.
- He is one of **the most important painters of the Spanish Golden Age**. He painted scenes of historical and cultural significance and scores of portraits of the Spanish royal family, other notable European figures, and commoners, culminating in the production of his masterpiece *Las Meninas* (1656).

Notable Works

- *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618)

- *The Surrender of Breda* (1634–35)
- *Rokeby Venus* (1647–51)
- *Portrait of Innocent X* (1650)
- *Las Hilanderas* (1655)
- *Las Meninas* (1656)

Diego Velázquez, *Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, 1618, 100.5 x 119.5 cm, National Gallery Scotland



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Old Woman Cooking Eggs*, 1618, 100.5 x 119.5 cm, National Galleries of Scotland

- Velázquez was eighteen or nineteen when he painted this remarkable picture and he still lived in Seville and so it was painted before he first visited Madrid in 1622. It is his first masterpiece and clearly demonstrates his flair for painting people and everyday objects directly from life. At this time he was known for painting these amusing and popular genre scenes known as bodegón (pronounced 'body-gone', it literally means 'pantry', 'tavern' or 'wine cellar' but has come to mean 'still life') such as *Old Woman Frying Eggs*. It was regarded as the lowest form of art and was much despised by connoisseurs. One wrote "workmen [probably Velázquez] of scant knowledge or reflection, who debase the noble art to vulgar notions, as we see today, in so many pictures of bodegones'.
- Velázquez was very conscious of his mastery of painting and painted to dazzle. He selects a wide variety of objects and textures to show his ability to represent anything. His aim is not illusion, not to fool you into thinking it is real life but to dazzle you with his virtuosity through you recognising it is just paint but with what impact, what mastery, what mystery. The objects in the painting radiate light as if self-illuminated and the woman and the boy are transfixed in time. The woman and the boy seem unaware of each other and suspended in time while they are poised to engage in some mysterious ritual.
- It was painted when he was still living in Seville and before he moved to the

capital Madrid in 1623.

- The painting is sometimes called *Old Woman Frying Eggs* or *Old Woman Poaching Eggs* as there has been some dispute of the cooking process.
- It is likely that the woman is his mother-in-law and the boy is a village apprentice he hired as a model.
- The figures seem frozen in space without the dynamism of **Caravaggio** (1571-1610) who had introduced close physical observation with a dramatic use of **chiaroscuro** (that came to be known as tenebrism).



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *The Surrender of Breda*, 1634–35, 307 x 367 cm, Museo del Prado

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- *The Surrender of Breda* (1634–1635) was inspired by Velázquez's first visit to Italy, in which he accompanied Ambrogio Spinola, who conquered the Dutch city of Breda a few years prior. This masterwork depicts a transfer of the key to the city from the Dutch to the Spanish army during the Siege of Breda. It is considered one of the best of Velázquez's paintings.



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *The Toilet of Venus* ('*The Rokeby Venus*'), 1647-51, National Gallery

Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *The Toilet of Venus* ('*The Rokeby Venus*'), 1647-51, National Gallery

- **"This is the only surviving example of a female nude by Velázquez.** The **subject was rare in Spain because it met with the disapproval of the Church.** Venus, the goddess of Love, was the most beautiful of the goddesses, and was regarded as a personification of female beauty. She is shown here with her son Cupid, who holds up a mirror for her to look both at herself and at the viewer.
- 'The Rokeby Venus' is first recorded in June 1651 in the collection of the Marqués del Carpio, son of the First Minister of Spain. It was probably made for the Marqués and was presumably displayed privately, thus avoiding the censure of the Spanish Inquisition. In the Carpio collection, Velázquez's painting was paired with a 16th-century Venetian picture of a naked nymph in a landscape seen from the front. The painting is known as 'The Rokeby Venus' because it was in the Morritt Collection at **Rokeby Park, now in County Durham**, before its acquisition by the Gallery." (National Gallery)

Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Portrait of Innocent X*, 1650, 141 x 119 cm, Doria Pamphilj Gallery



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Portrait of Innocent X*, 1650, 141 x 119 cm, Doria Pamphilj Gallery, Rome

A smaller version is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and a study is on display at Apsley House in London.

Francis Bacon (1909-1992), *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X*, 1953, Des Moines Art Center, Des Moines, Iowa

- It was painted by Velázquez during his second trip to Italy from 1649 to 1651. Many artists and art critics consider it to be the finest portrait ever painted.
- It is noted as a realistic portrait of a highly intelligent, shrewd and aging man. The pope, born Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, was initially wary of having his portrait taken by Velázquez, but relented after he was given reproductions of examples of Velázquez's portraiture. It was displayed only to his family and was lost from public view during the 17th and 18th centuries.
- Apparently, when the Pope saw the finished portrait, he exclaimed, somewhat disconcerted: "*Troppo vero!*" ("all too true!"), though he was not able to deny the intrinsic quality of the portrait as a masterpiece but perhaps it gave away too much of his personality for comfort.
- Velázquez's signature is on the piece of paper held by the Pope.
- It has been described as the greatest portrait ever painted.
- The Irish-born painter Francis Bacon painted a series of distorted variants often known as the "Screaming Popes", which consists of more than 45 known

variants executed throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Innocent_X

Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Las Meninas* ('The Maids of Honour'), 1656-57, 318 x 276 cm, Museo del Prado



Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), *Las Meninas* ('The Maids of Honour'), 1656-57, 318 x 276 cm, Museo del Prado

- This is it. This work has been described by many artists and critics as the greatest painting ever produced by any artist. It raises profound questions about art and illusion, about the viewer and the figures depicted. It is one of the most widely analysed works in Western painting. Velázquez is looking out at us and he is holding a paintbrush and palette so it appears he is painting us. But in the mirror at the back of the room is the reflection of the king and queen. Does this mean we are meant to be them or are we standing with them? In the foreground the **five-year old Infanta Margaret Theresa** stares at us (our the king and queen). Two ladies-in-waiting attend to her, one curtsies and the other offers a red cup on a golden plate. On the right are two dwarves one of whom tries to rouse a sleeping mastiff with his foot. Behind them is the princess's chaperone talking to a bodyguard. In the doorway the queen's chamberlain pauses. One of his jobs was to open doors for the queen and it has been suggested that he has opened the door and is holding back the curtain as the royal couple (or us) are about to leave. This also explains why one of the ladies-in-waiting is beginning to curtsy.
- It has been suggested that the royal couple in the mirror are a reflection of the painting. The canvas is very large for a Velázquez portrait and is about the same size as *Las Meninas*. Also this painting contains the only double portrait of the royal couple by Velázquez so it is suggested it is a reflection of the couple in the portrait.

- There is a mirror at the back of Jan van Eyck *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) which was owned by Philip at the time and would have been seen by Velázquez.
- One of the most profound analyses is Michel Foucault in his *The Order of Things* (1966). He devotes a whole chapter to the analysis which solely concerns the complex network of visual relations without regard to subject matter, biography or the social context. His conclusion is that this painting represents a new way of thinking for all of European thought. It illustrates the great discontinuity between the Classical and the modern. The Classical is about representing something, the modern is about the representer, the artist. In this case the artist appears in front of the represented, a part of it but separate from it.
- It has been suggested that the painting "suggests that art, and life, are an illusion." A contemporary playwright wrote:
 - *What is a life? A frenzy. What is life?
A shadow, an illusion, and a sham.
The greatest good is small; all life, it seems
Is just a dream, and even dreams are dreams*
- In 17th-century Spain, painters rarely enjoyed high social status. Painting was regarded as a craft, not an art such as poetry or music. Nonetheless, Velázquez worked his way up through the ranks of the court of Philip IV, and in February 1651 was appointed palace chamberlain. The post brought him status and material reward, but its duties made heavy demands on his time. During the remaining eight years of his life, he painted only a few works, mostly portraits of the royal family. When he painted *Las Meninas*, he had been with the royal household for 33 years. If we look closely we can see the red cross of the Order of Santiago painted on his breast. Presumably this detail was added at a later date, as the painter was admitted to the order by the king's decree on November 28, 1659.
- Its complex and enigmatic composition raises questions about reality and illusion and creates an uncertain relationship between the viewer and the figures depicted. The relationship between reality and illusion were central concerns of Spanish culture in the 17th century as we see in Miguel de Cervantes (1547-1616) *Don Quixote*, the best known work of Spanish Baroque literature. Because of these complexities, *Las Meninas* has been

one of the most widely analyzed works in Western painting. It has long been recognised as one of the most important paintings in Western art history and has been voted one of the ten most influential works of art of all time.

- The painting has been cut down on both the left and right sides. It was damaged in the fire that destroyed the Alcázar in 1734 and was restored by court painter Juan García de Miranda (1677–1749). The left cheek of the Infanta was almost completely repainted to compensate for a substantial loss of pigment.
- In recent years, the picture has suffered a loss of texture and hue. Due to exposure to pollution and crowds of visitors, the once-vivid contrasts between blue and white pigments in the costumes of the meninas have faded. It was last cleaned in 1984 under the supervision of the American conservator John Brealey, to remove a "yellow veil" of dust that had gathered since the previous restoration in the 19th century. The cleaning provoked "furious protests, not because the picture had been damaged in any way, but because it looked different". However, in the opinion of López-Rey, the "restoration was impeccable". Due to its size, importance, and value, the painting is not lent out for exhibition.

Depicted people

- Philip IV of Spain (1605-1665), in the mirror
- Mariana of Austria (1634-1696), wife of Philip IV, in the mirror
- Infanta Margaret Theresa of Spain (an infanta is the eldest daughter of a ruling monarch who is not heir to the throne). She became Holy Roman Empress; German Queen; Queen consort of Hungary and Bohemia and Archduchess consort of Austria.
- Diego Velázquez (at the easel)