

Diego Velázquez

Las Meninas, 1656

Painted in 1656 the *Family of Philip IV*, better known as **Las Meninas** (Spanish for 'The Maidens in Waiting'), represents a true synthesis not only of Velázquez' art but also of a whole society and culture. The very large canvas was painted for the king's private apartments in the *Alcazar*, or *Royal Palace*, in Madrid.

The artwork is **remarkable for its conceptual and compositional complexity**.

The scene is set in the ruler's room and is so exactly reproduced as to allow recognition in the paintings hung on the walls of two copies of pictures by Rubens and Jordaens.

The centre of the painting is occupied by the infanta or princess Margaret, daughter of Philip IV and Marianne of Austria. She is surrounded by two ladies in waiting who are very young and attentive to her needs. One is kneeling as she offers a small red jug while the other seems about to curtsy.

There are still other court figures in the room: the famous dwarf Maribarbola; the court jester Nicolasito who is bothering an unperturbed dog; Marcella de Ulloa, a court assistant who, because she is widowed, is dressed as a nun; beside her is Don Diego Ruiz and, on the steps at the far back, José Nieto Velázquez, the superintendent of the royal palaces.

In the left foreground we also see the artist Velázquez with his palette and paintbrush in hand standing in front of a large canvas as if he is evaluating the perspective of what he is painting.

Fig. 1 Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 318x276 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



Reality and its Double

The painting might seem like a simple homage to courtly life, of which the painter was proud to be part, but a careful examination tells us that something more complex is happening in this image.

What is Velázquez painting on his very large canvas? He is portraying the sovereigns Philip IV and Marianne who we see reflected in the mirror placed on the back wall of the room. This makes us realise that the royal couple should be standing in exactly the same position as we are; the royal presence is also suggested by the fact that almost everyone depicted inside the royal room is turning their gazes in our direction. Therefore the king and queen are simultaneously the viewers and the protagonists of the painting, key figures in a reflection on **the relationship between fiction and reality, between illusion and truth**. The subject is Baroque par excellence: here the act of painting is depicted just as a narrative is recounted in Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or the play is acted in Lope de Vega's theatre.

A similar layout was found in the Arnolfini wedding by Jan Van Eyck in which the mirror was placed behind the sitters to reflect the artist, without changing any relationship between Van Eyck and his sitters. By contrast Velázquez has completely overturned the situation and all the roles represented.

The artist is caught painting what is in front of him, that is, external to the painted surface, where we are. The infanta and the two Meninas are really in the room and, therefore, outside the subject of the canvas being painted. The whole scene gets even more complicated if we think that the mirror reflects figures who aren't really there: instead of the royal couple, we are standing in their place observing the scene. In this 'game', truth is false and falsehood is true.

An Eccentric Perspective

There is also another interpretation of the artwork: the perspective is eccentric and has a vanishing point in the hand of the superintendent who is seen as he exits from the door at the back. So what the mirror reflects might not be the royalty placed in front of the painter but rather the painting on which the artist is currently working, therefore an image of the image.

In such a case *Las Meninas* would be a **meditation on the relationship between representation and reality** while, simultaneously, exalting the art of painting in an incredibly skilful way. Quite rightly when Luca Giordano saw the canvas in 1692 he termed it a "*theology of painting*."

The image seems **absolutely lifelike** for the extraordinary precision of the details, from the individuals' dress to their facial features, to the canvas which, seen from the back, shows that it has been soaked with wet paint. Also noteworthy is **the psychological rendering** of the various figures who enliven the scene, as well as **the light** which, entering from a side window, illuminates the room in an uneven way until it finally turns to shadow in the upper right-hand corner.