

## “What’s new? Velázquez.” Salvador Dalí and Velázquez

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In Salvador Dalí’s work we have always been able to discover in one way or another the influences, sympathies and phobias behind it. At times Dalí reveals them clearly, while at others he leaves us clues, in both the pictorial works and the writings, that allow us to work them out for ourselves. And all this information does not pass unnoticed: a look at his extremely extensive pictorial work suffices to show this. And when we look at his writings, we find all these references and many more besides. His private library is full of works on various authors who influenced him over the course of his career. Amongst them is one to whom Dalí aimed to lend particular emphasis: Velázquez.

Salvador Dalí’s admiration for the character and work of Velázquez is well known. Velázquez’s practice of painting scenes “on location” and the fact that this made his paintings into photographic takes must have been something that fascinated Dalí. We find this admiration from very early on and Dalí showed it in the private sphere too. His Portlligat house is decorated with a number of characters sporting moustaches, among them Velázquez. Dalí used to say that he collected moustaches, especially famous ones. In his studio, too, we find a gridded reproduction of *Las Meninas* hanging on the wall.

In 1919 Dalí was a sixth-form student at the grammar school in Figueres, the present-day Ramon Muntaner school. The magazine *Studium* was produced as the school magazine in those days, and Salvador Dalí contributed to it and was a member of the editorial team. At that time he started a series of portraits of various masters of universal painting under the title “The Great Masters of Painting”, and amongst them we find Velázquez. Dalí highlights as that artist’s great works *Las Meninas* (The Maids of Honour) and *Las Hilanderas* (The Spinners), which he says show a remarkable technique, unsurpassed by anybody else, at times comparing its “colour distribution and placement” with that of the Impressionists.

In the 1940s we can see Velázquez’s influence clearly in the work of Salvador Dalí, with a precursor in the magnificent 1938 oil painting, *The Image Disappears*. We might also cite works such as *Galarina and Basket of Bread*. In that decade, too, and specifically in the year 1948, he wrote his treatise on painting, *Fifty Magic Secrets of Painting*, in which the artist explained the fruit of his experience as a painter and gave out his recipes for those able to understand and apply them. Dalí undertakes a comparative analysis of the qualities that all artists must have – technique, inspiration, colour, outline, genius, composition, originality, mysteriousness – and he awards points to various masters of universal painting, such as Leonardo, Meissonier, Ingres, Velázquez, Bouguereau, Dalí himself, Picasso, Raphael, Manet, Jan Vermeer and Mondrian. In this

personal classification, Velázquez is surpassed only by the Dutch painter Jan Vermeer, while Mondrian figures as a counterbalance to the admiration he feels for the other painters.

Later, in the fifties and sixties, we move into the period of nuclear mysticism and the painting of large-format works. And it is from that time through to the end of his life that this influence is very much to be felt. Examples are to be found in paintings such as *Velázquez Painting the Infanta Margarita with the Lights and Shadows of His Own Glory* (1958), *The Maids of Honour* (*Las Meninas*) (1960), and *Portrait of Juan de Pareja repairing a mandolin string* (1960). In 1960 he took part in a group exhibition at the Sala Gaspar gallery in Barcelona, entitled *O figura. Homenaje informal a Velázquez*, with a text in praise of the man, illustrated with a reproduction of *Las Meninas* by Velázquez. At the end of that same year he staged an exhibition at the Carstairs Gallery in New York under the title *The Secret Number of Velázquez Revealed*.

The 1960s were also the years the Theatre-Museum idea was taking shape. We find a photo-montage showing the courtyard with various works by Salvador Dalí. Presiding over the doorway leading into the entrance hall from the courtyard is the personality who lets us through; drawing back a curtain, we find José Nieto by Velázquez (to whom Dalí also dedicated a work). In 1965 he painted *The Apotheosis of the Dollar*, a work which brings together the most significant images of Dalí's iconography. And here we can hardly miss, in the bottom right part of the painting, the figure of Dalí viewed from behind, dressed like Velázquez, painting Gala. A fragment of the work *Las Meninas* is shown repeated as many as three times.

In the 1970s the impact of science in the form of stereoscopic pictures, holograms, and so forth, shows through very clearly in the work of Salvador Dalí. It is also the decade in which we find a large number of writings in which he quotes Velázquez and others referring to him directly. We have, for example, "Holos! Holos! Velázquez! Gabor!" published in the American magazine *Art News* in April 1972. That article coincided with the presentation of the hologram of the same title at an exhibition held at the Knoedler gallery in New York and the Theatre-Museum in Figueres. In this work Dalí renders homage to the figure of Velázquez and at the same time to the inventor of holography, Denis Gabor. Here, he encompasses two of his passions: Velázquez and optics, the phenomena related with it and optical instruments (at the age of 10 he had invented an apparatus for seeing everything in a more impressionistic way, as the artist himself tells us in his autobiographical *Secret Life*). From 1974, we might particularly note the work *Bust of Velázquez Turning into Three Figures Conversing*, housed at the Theatre-Museum. Dalí, playing with the dual images, paints onto a bronze bust of Velázquez a female figure with headscarf kneeling with her back to us, where the chin and mouth of the bust would be, and two faces with ruffs (two men draped in capes), painted over the eyes, with a reproduction of *Las Meninas* on the forehead.

In 1976 in an article of his entitled "Eureka", Dalí said: "Since Impressionism, the entire history of modern art has revolved around a single objective: reality. And this might lead us to ask: What's new, Velázquez?". This last phrase is also the title of an article

the artist published in the magazine *Le Sauvage* in Paris in October 1976. And from the years 1976-77 we have different stereoscopic versions of *Las Meninas*.

On 9 May 1979 Dalí was made foreign associate of the Académie des Beaux-Arts of the Institut de France. He gave an address called "Gala, Velázquez and the Toison d'Or", in which he related Velázquez with his theories about the Perpignan station. In the 10 May 1979 edition of *L'Aurore* Michel Déon, of the Académie Française, spoke as follows of Salvador Dalí: "Few people know that this artist is a skilled technician, who has rediscovered lost recipes, and that his greatest canvasses will one day be compared with those of Velázquez or of Raphael".

In his last creations, Dalí is trying to discover the secrets of the old masters. His works from this period draw inspiration from those by Michelangelo and Velázquez, and Dalí tries to assimilate them and integrate them into his own paintings. Amongst the works inspired by Velázquez we find: *The pearl, after "The Infanta Margarita"* (1981), *Velázquez and a Figure* (1982), *The Infanta Margarita María by Velázquez appearing in the Silhouettes of Horsemen in the Courtyard of El Escorial* (1982), etc.

The only model that Dalí acknowledges himself to have had is Velázquez, of whom Léon-Paul Fargue has said: "in this universe of affirmed feelings and dreams that is painting, Velázquez symbolises a soul as it should be, violent and meticulous in its forms; it is the art of living serenely". This art is also Dalí's art.