

Interpretation without
Representation,
or, The Viewing of *Las Meninas**

ALONG WITH VERMEER'S *Art of Painting* and Courbet's *Studio*, Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (fig. 1) is surely one of the greatest representations of pictorial representation in all of Western painting. Why has this work eluded full and satisfactory discussion by art historians? Why should it be that the major study, the most serious and sustained piece of writing on this work in our time, is by Michel Foucault?¹ There is, I shall argue, a structural explanation built into the interpretive procedures of the discipline itself that has made a picture such as *Las Meninas* literally unthinkable under the rubric of art history. Before considering the work, as I propose to do, in representational terms, let us consider why this should be so.

Historically, we can trace two lines of argument about *Las Meninas*: the first, most elegantly encapsulated in Théophile Gautier's "Où est donc le tableau?" has been concerned with the extraordinarily real presence of the painted world.² The frame appears to intersect a room whose ceiling, floor, and window bays extend, so it is suggested, to include the viewer. The light and shadow-filled space is not only intended for the viewer's eyes—as in the case of its much smaller predecessor hung at the Spanish court, Van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*. Given the great size of the canvas, it is intended also for the viewer's body. The size of the figures is a match for our own. This appeal at once to eye and to body is a remarkable pictorial performance which contradictorily presents powerful human figures by means of illusionary surfaces. In the nineteenth century it was a commonplace for travellers to Madrid to refer to it in what we can call photographic terms. Continuing a tradition started in the eighteenth century about such works as Vermeer's *View of Delft*, it was compared to nature seen in a *camera obscura*, and Stirling-Maxwell, an early writer, noted that *Las Meninas* anticipated Daguerre. The pictorial quality of presence is sustained in the apparently casual deportment of the figures that is distinguished, as so often in the works of Velázquez, by a particular feature: the fact that we are looked at by those at whom we are looking. To twentieth century eyes at least, this gives it the appearance of a snapshot being taken. In the foreground, the little princess turns to us from her entourage, as does one of her maids, and a dwarf, and of course Velázquez himself who has stepped back from his canvas for this very purpose.



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The gaze out of the canvas is a consistent feature in Velázquez's works. In their separate portraits, royalty and dwarf alike meet our eyes, but most astounding are the minor figures in the larger scenes: two of the peasants celebrating Bacchus in an early work (fig. 2), for example, or the memorable soldier to the left and the officers to the right of *The Surrender of Breda*, or the woman situated at the margin between the two spaces of *The Spinners*. I refer to this phenomenon as a gaze, to distinguish it from a glance. It does not initiate or attend to some occurrence; empty of expression, it is not, in short, narrative in nature. The gaze, rather, signals from within the picture that the viewer outside the picture is seen and in turn it acknowledges the state of being seen. Though not invented for the occasion of *Las Meninas*, the device is heightened here because it is thematized by the situation, or possibly the situations at hand.

Just what the situation is—hence what the subject of the work is—has been the concern of the second line of argument about *Las Meninas*. The problem is not one of identification—an early commentator identified each participant in the scene (even including the figure pausing in the light of the distant doorway whose role of

Fig. 2. Diego Velázquez. *Los Borrachos*, 1628–29. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



marshal in the queen's entourage significantly matches Velázquez's role in service to the king). However the presence of the king and queen marked by their reflection in the prominent mirror at the center of the far wall, and the large picture seen from the back on its stretcher, which intrudes at the left, raise problems. Where are the king and queen or what is the source of their reflections, and what is the subject being painted on the unseen canvas? The impulse in recent studies has been to answer these questions by attempting to supply the plot—a little playlet as one scholar calls it—of which this picture is a scene.³ The little Infanta, so this account goes, has dropped in to see Velázquez at work, stops to ask her maid of honor for a drink of water and looks up when surprised by the unexpected entrance of her parents, the king and queen.

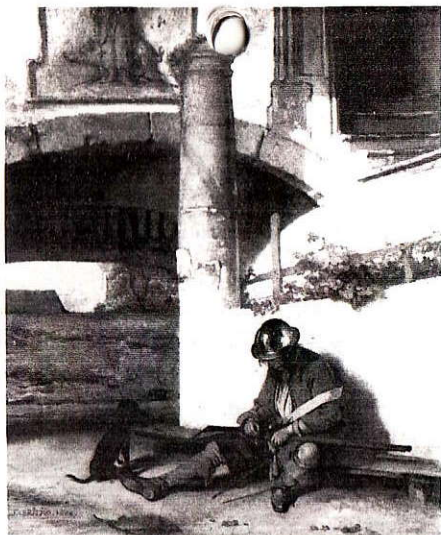
It is characteristic of art historical practice that it is the question of plot to which the notion of the meaning of the work is appended, rather than to the question of the nature of the pictorial representation. Though scholars differ about the specifics of the plot—are the royal pair posing for their portraits when the princess arrives, or is it rather the princess and her retinue who pose as king and queen arrive?—they are agreed that it is the presence of the king and queen with the painter that is emplotted here.⁴ And it is on this basis that the meaning of *Las Meninas* is today interpreted as a claim for the nobility of painting as a liberal art and as a personal claim for nobility on the part of Velázquez himself. In short, *Las Meninas* is now understood as a visual statement of the social rank desired by the painter.

To back up this point, detailed documentation has been collected to show that all Spanish painters worked under financial and social pressures due to their low professional status as craftsmen, and that some struggled to bring about change.⁵ Of course any pictorial performance of the brilliance and accomplishment of *Las Meninas* might be said to make high claims for art, but the nature of Velázquez's claims are problematic in the sense that he does *not* distinguish the liberal aspect of art from its craft. From his self-conscious avowal of paint as both the creator of illusion and as material pigment in his early *Waterseller*, to his devoted foregrounding of women preparing thread for the weaving of tapestries in the work known as *The Spinners*, Velázquez embraced the very craftsmanship that this modern interpretation would have him reject. In *Las Meninas*, the casual yet striking juxtaposition of Velázquez's palette with the adjacent head of a maid of honor—beribboned head matched to palette in both brush stroke and hue—makes the claim for craft once more.

In order to reduce *Las Meninas* to its current meaning two moves are necessary: first, against the evidence of the picture it is argued that artist and king are represented together and their proximity is seen as the central feature of the work; second, art historians separate what they claim to be the seventeenth century meaning of the work from its *appearance*, which is put in its place as merely the concern of modern viewers.⁶

It is this insistence on the separation of questions of meaning from questions of

Fig. 3. Carel Fabritius. *The Sentry*, c. 1648. Staatliches Museum, Schwerin.



representation that makes *Las Meninas* unthinkable within the established rubric of art history. The problem is endemic to the field. Before suggesting why this should be so, let me give one further example: the recent discovery of what should perhaps be called paintings without meaning. I am not referring to the response to a dada-ist maneuver, but rather to the attempted interpretation of “normal” Dutch paintings such as Fabritius’s haunting *Sentry* (fig. 3). The soldier seated with his expectant dog beneath an improbable column, loading his gun under the aspect of sleep, and assimilated to a complex assemblage of truncated or only partly visible structures is puzzling, but surely not meaningless. Since, however, research has turned up no text or moral message which informs the painting, a scholar has felt justified in concluding that what we have before us is just realism.⁷ There is a clear and present danger for art historians who fail to find the kinds of messages—be they moral, social, or professional—currently considered to be the meanings of works by artists such as Velázquez, Vermeer, or Bruegel. The danger is that these works also will have to be admitted to be meaningless. What is missing is a notion of representation or a concern with what it is to picture something. And it is therefore not surprising that in recent times it is students of texts who have most successfully turned their attention to the works of artists such as these—artists whose works are self-conscious and rich in those representational concerns to which literary studies have been more attuned.

Why should art history find itself in this fix? The answer lies, paradoxically, in a great strength of the discipline particularly as it has been viewed and used by literary scholarship. The cornerstone of the art historical notion of meaning is iconography—so named by Panofsky who was its founding father in our time. Its great achievement was to demonstrate that representational pictures are not intended solely for perception, but can be read as having a secondary or deeper level of mean-

ing. What then do we make of the pictorial surface itself? In his seminal essay on iconography and iconology, Panofsky clearly evades this question.⁸ He introduces his subject with the simple example of meeting a friend on the street who lifts his hat in greeting. The blur of shapes and colors identified as a man and the sense that he is in a certain humor are called by Panofsky the primary or natural meanings, but the understanding that to raise the hat is a greeting is a secondary or conventional meaning. So far we have been dealing only with life. Panofsky’s strategy is then to simply recommend transferring the results of this analysis from everyday life to a work of art. So now we have a *picture* of a man lifting his hat. What Panofsky chooses to ignore is that the man is not present but is *re-presented* in the picture. In what manner, under what conditions is the man represented in paint on the surface of a canvas?

Art historians answer this question in stylistic terms. Gombrich, quite consciously taking up where Panofsky left off, made it his major task to define style. Encapsulated in the brilliant phrase “making comes before matching,” the ruling insight of Gombrich’s *Art and Illusion* has provided a generation of literary critics with the touchstone for their analyses of literary convention. But they have ignored the fact that in the process of replacing an expressive notion of style with a representational one, Gombrich effectively eliminates just what he sets out to define. Despite his emphasis on “making” or convention, he is far from the structuralist that he is sometimes taken to be. Gombrich treats representation as a matter of skill—skill in rendering and skill in perception. Pictorial conventions in Western art, he argues, serve the perfection of naturalistic representation which Gombrich significantly

Fig. 4. Albrecht Dürer. Draftsman drawing a nude (woodcut), in *Unterweysung der Messung* (Nuremberg, 1538).



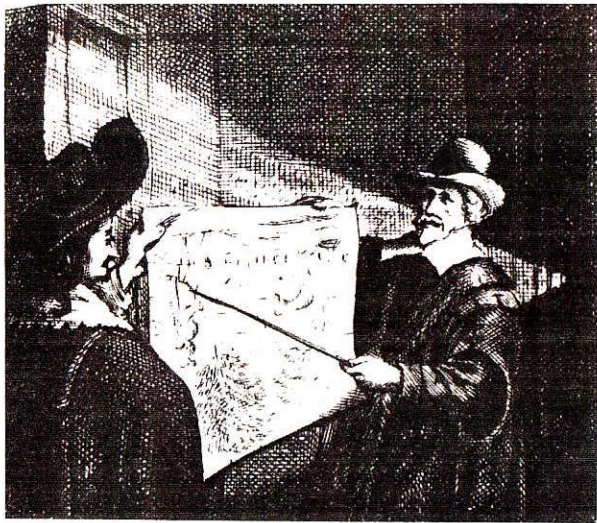


Fig. 5. Illustration of the working of the eye in Johan van Beverwyck, *Schat der Ongezontheit* (Amsterdam, 1664), vol. II, p. 87.

chooses to call “illusion.” Basing himself on the irrefutable evidence offered by the study of perception, Gombrich concludes by defining a perfect representation as indistinguishable to our eyes from nature. Like the current commentators on *Las Meninas*; Gombrich effectively credits the perfect representation with making pictures disappear: the question of representation retreats before the perfect illusion Velázquez produces of the painter, the princess, and her entourage. Any meaning must clearly lie elsewhere—beyond or beneath the surface of the picture.

It is here that the strength of Foucault’s commentary on *Las Meninas* lies. Beginning, as he does, with a determinate and determining notion of classical representation, he finds in this painting *its* representation. Foucault’s exposition of this point proceeds through a careful viewing of the work which is impressive for its attentiveness. His interest in representation gives him the motive for looking which is lost to those who seek meaning in signs of a claim to social status. Foucault finely evokes the theme of reciprocity between an absent viewer (before the painting) and the world in view. He argues that the absence of a subject-viewer is essential to classical representation. This seems to me wrong. For the reciprocity between absent viewer and world in view is produced not by the *absence* of a conscious human subject, as Foucault argues, but rather by Velázquez’s ambition to embrace two conflicting modes of representation, each of which constitutes the relationship between the viewer and the picturing of the world differently. It is the tension between these two—as between the opposing poles of two magnets that one might attempt to bring together with one’s hands—that informs this picture.

Imagine two different kinds of pictures—the first is conceived to be like a window on the perceived world. The artist positions himself on the viewer’s side of the

picture surface and looks through the frame to the world, which he then reconstructs on the surface of the picture by means of the geometric convention of linear perspective. We can represent this with Dürer’s rendering of a draftsman at work (fig. 4). The relationship of the male artist to the female observed, who offers her naked body to him to capture in his drawing, is part and parcel of the commanding attitude toward the world assumed by this mode of representation.

The second mode is not a window but rather a surface onto which an image of the world casts itself, just as light focussed through a lens forms a picture on the retina of the eye. In place of an artist who frames the world to picture it, the world produces its own image without a necessary frame. This replicative image is just there for the looking, without the intervention of a human maker. The world so seen is conceived of as existing prior to the artist-viewer. And in contrast to Dürer’s artist, let us take two men observing the image made by a *camera obscura* (fig. 5). (Appropriately, this is how the working of the eye was illustrated in a Dutch medical handbook of the time.) The men are in a dark room which is equipped with a light-hole fitted with a lens. They hold out a surface on which is cast the image of the landscape outside. Rather than man possessing through his art the woman he observes, two men attend to the image of the prior world. The artist of the first kind claims that “I see the world” while that of the second shows rather that the world is “being seen.”⁹

I am not just imagining two kinds of pictures, but describing two modes of representation that are central in Western art. As an example of the first, Albertian model we might keep in our mind’s eye a work such as Titian’s *Venus of Urbino*. The artist is a viewer who is actively looking out at objects—preferably human figures—in space, figures whose appearance, considered as a matter of size, is a function of their distance from the viewer. For the second, which I call the northern or descriptive mode, think of Vermeer’s *View of Delft*. A fragment of a larger world is compressed into a piece of canvas, impressing its surface with color and light without taking the position of a viewer external to it into account. No scale or human measure is assumed. In Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* we find the two as it were compounded in a dazzling, but fundamentally unresolvable way. While in the Albertian picture the artist presumes himself to stand with the viewer *before* the pictured world in both a physical and epistemological sense, in the descriptive mode he is accounted for, if at all, *within* that world. A pictorial device signalling this is the artist mirrored in the work (as in Van Eyck’s *Arnolfini*) or a figure situated as a looker within, rather like a surveyor situated within the very world he maps. In Dutch paintings of this type the looker within the picture does not look out. That would indeed be a contradiction since a picture of this sort does not assume the existence of viewers prior to and external to it, as does the Albertian mode.

In *Las Meninas* the looker within the picture—the one whose view it is—not only looks out, but is suitably none other than the artist himself. What is extraordi-



Fig. 6. Diego Velázquez. *Baltasar Carlos and a Dwarf*, 1631. Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Purchased, Henry Lillie Pierce Fund.

nary about this picture as a representation is that we must take it at once as a replication of the world *and* as a reconstruction of the world that we view through the window frame. The world seen has priority, but so also do we, the viewers on this side of the picture surface. Let me explain. Paradoxically, the world seen that is prior to us is precisely what, by looking out (and here the artist is joined by the princess and part of her retinue), confirms or acknowledges us. But if *we* had not arrived to stand before this world to look at it, the priority of the world seen would not have been defined in the first place. Indeed, to come full circle, the world seen is before us because we (along with the king and queen as noted in the distant mirror) are what commanded its presence.¹⁰

Las Meninas is produced not out of a single, classical notion of representation as Foucault suggests, but rather out of specific pictorial traditions of representation. It confounds a stable reading, not because of the absence of the viewer-subject, but because the painting holds in suspension two contradictory (and to Velázquez's sense of things, inseparable) modes of picturing the relationship of viewer, and picture, to world. One assumes the priority of a viewer before the picture who is the measure of the world and the other assumes that the world is prior to any human presence and is thus essentially immeasurable.

It is the economy of *Las Meninas* that so many of its elements share in this unresolved ambivalence—an ambivalence that might be said to form the basis of Velázquez's representation of the Spanish court. Princess Margarita is made the representative figure of these contending modes. We must not forget that Velázquez chose a portrait of the little Infanta for the center of his masterpiece.¹¹ Why should this be so? The question is not asked. But this diminutive yet royal woman seems remarkably to answer to the motives, as Kenneth Burke would call them, of Velázquez's art as well as of his view of the court. Even as he once again confirms woman as a central motif and possession of the European painter's art, Velázquez questions her role: she is a princess, but at the same time a little girl; she is most marvelously self-possessed in bearing, but is herself possessed by the court and by the royal lineage marked by her placement just below her parents' mirrored image.

Let us consider the question of scale. No measure rules here: size and significance are at odds. (I have in mind the dislocation of scale and value beloved by northern artists—Paulus Potter's huge young bull juxtaposed against a tiny church steeple.) Though the princess is the center of all attention, her maids, one bent down to meet her level, and even a dwarf, dwarf her. Astonishingly, of all the figures the most diminished in size are the king and queen. This is of course a family portrait with forebears framed on the back wall in a contemporary Dutch mode. Velázquez had already dealt with conditions of lineage and succession in an earlier portrait of the late Prince Baltasar Carlos, then heir to the throne. The young prince is learning to ride in the courtyard of the Buen Retiro, Olivares is in the middle ground and the tiny figures of his royal parents are just visible on a distant balcony. It is a kind of rehearsal for *Las Meninas*, though on a much smaller scale and much less complex.¹² In *Las Meninas* it is not only the size but the mirroring of the king and queen that determines the *nature* of their presence. Mirrored and framed on the back wall, "reflected" in the tiny Infanta's pose and the attentive gazes out of the picture to the front, their presence is an oblique affair. At court, as in a picture, order is produced by acts of representation.

The nature and condition of the social order continued to puzzle Velázquez. The question was of course pressed on him, living as he did in the exceptionally formal and ceremonial world of the Spanish court. The little princess among her attendants is a successor to Bacchus among his in the early *Los Borrachos*, as well as to Apollo

at Vulcan's forge. The dwarfs and fools at court, like the painted peasants or foundry workers, display a certain misrule. They were expected to challenge etiquette. Velázquez's early portrait of Baltasar Carlos with a dwarf (fig. 6) focusses on this. The portrait, it has been argued, commemorates the celebration of the Oath of Allegiance (*juramento*) to the future king.¹³ A tiny, upright child, dressed in the guise of a captain-general, conscious of his station as his eyes confront ours directly, is accompanied by an awkward dwarf, his eyes undirected, holding a rattle and an apple which ape the scepter and orb of the king-to-be. Dwarf and future king present themselves for portrayal, but with a difference. The difference existed in life but we see it due to Velázquez's representation. It is Velázquez, after all, who provides the framework of art. But does art necessarily frame? One could argue that the difference between prince and dwarf is that the prince is framed by art while the dwarf remains resolutely free of it.

It is hard not to see the double portrait from the vantage point offered by *Las Meninas*, where self-presentation, the social order, and the production of art are so prominently displayed and in which framing plays such a major role. Seen one way, *Las Meninas* is a picture about the role of framing: frames in the form of pictures, a mirror, doors and windows measure out the walls at the back and to the right, while the edge of the large canvas intrudes at the left. The king, queen, and their daughter the princess who is posing for them, are known by being framed. But there is contrary testimony offered by the picture as a whole. It is, as we have seen earlier, distinctly unframed, admitting of no bounds and thus with its odd disruption of significant size it contradicts the order established in the framing of the court.

It has been my intention in this brief section to begin to suggest ways in which pictorial representation, an aesthetic order, engages also a social one. It seems to me, however, to be a mistake to conclude, as has been done on occasion, that Velázquez paints the bankruptcy (as it undoubtedly then was) of the Spanish court and the failure of the royal line.¹⁴ What is remarkable—in the sense of needing to be remarked—about this art is something that Velázquez shares with a number of seventeenth century artists. It is that his understanding of the complex conditions of representation—both aesthetic and social—did not undermine his trust in it. As *Las Meninas* shows, Velázquez sees himself as part of the very court he sees through.

Notes

* An earlier version of this paper was presented at the session on "Literature and the Other Arts" at the annual meeting of the Modern Language Association, New York, 1981.

1. Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, English translation (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 3-16.

2. For this quotation and for a brief summary of early reactions to the painting see Carl Justi's magisterial *Diego Velazquez and his Times*, translated by A. H. Keane (London: H. Grevel and Co., 1889), pp. 414-22.
3. See Jonathan Brown, "The Meaning of *Las Meninas*," in *Images and Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Spanish Painting* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), p. 91.
4. Jonathan Brown names the (putative) central event a "royal epiphany." Though admitting that the king and queen are only shown indirectly, he nevertheless wants to make sense of the painting by arguing that "an extraordinary perhaps unprecedented event is being shown to us. It is difficult to recall an earlier painting in which a living monarch and a painter at work are represented together." *Ibid.*, p. 92.
5. The production of *Las Meninas* has been related to (actually only juxtaposed with) the wish of artists in Madrid to enhance their status by founding an academy to replace their guild, to the general effort of the members of all craft guilds to avoid the excessive levies placed on them by the hard-pressed state, and to Velázquez's long campaign to obtain a knighthood. Although the record of Velázquez's ambitions at court is clear, his campaign for the knighthood only began two years after he painted *Las Meninas*, and the red Order of Santiago clearly displayed on his chest was put there only after the artist's death. See Jonathan Brown, "The Meaning of *Las Meninas*," p. 92ff and also Mary Crawford Volk, "On Velázquez and the Liberal Arts," *The Art Bulletin* 60 (1978), 69-86.
6. "To the modern observer, and particularly to the modern artist, this supremely sophisticated composition may be the picture's chief claim to attention. But it is not to be supposed that in the seventeenth century it was devised for its own sake alone, without regard for the meaning of the whole." Madlyn Millner Kahr, *Velázquez: The Art of Painting* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 173.
7. In his recent monograph on Fabritius, Christopher Brown comments, "There is no obvious topical military reference to be found in the painting, nor is dereliction of duty an entirely convincing interpretation. The possibility remains that no specific meaning was intended by the artist." Christopher Brown, *Carel Fabritius* (Oxford: Phaidon Press, 1981), p. 48. The extraordinary complexity of the architectural space reduces its human inhabitant, by contrast, to the status of an inanimate object. The soldier even takes on the colors of his environment. Human passivity is shown to be in the very nature of the world. It echoes Mars asleep or in repose (a figure pictured by Velázquez, among others at the time) but offers the soldier as a fact of pictorial, rather than mythological, nature.
8. Erwin Panofsky, "Iconography and Iconology: An Introduction to the Study of Renaissance Art," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955), pp. 26-30.
9. This verbal turn is not irrelevant. The distinction I am drawing between two pictorial modes has certain analogies to the distinction that can be drawn between the properties of represented thought and speech (known as *style indirect libre*) and those of narration *per se* in written language. Like represented thought and speech, represented seeing (for that is a useful designation for the northern or descriptive mode) manifests extraordinary attentiveness without, however, acknowledging that interplay between sender and receiver—be it world and viewer or two speakers—that normally characterizes pictures in the Italian mode or language when spoken. See Ann Banfield, "Where Epistemology, Style, and Grammar Meet," *New Literary History* 9 (1978), 417-54.
10. As my interpretation suggests, I think that the long held view of the intrinsically puzzling nature of *Las Meninas* is justified. The question is why and in what respects we take it to be puzzling. A powerful study by the philosopher John Searle posits some of the same contradictions of which I have written. His conclusion differs from mine because Searle

assumes that there is a single canon of classical pictorial representation with which the Velázquez picture is not consistent. The correction I offer to his viewing is to identify the inconsistency with the presence of two identifiable and incompatible modes of pictorial representation. It is, then, not the exception to a single representational canon, but the tension between the two that is at the heart of the picture. Velázquez is engaged in a testing and questioning of the nature of the artist's relationship to his work and to the world as posited in Western art. The refutation of Searle's position by Snyder and Cohen accommodates the picture on the narrowest of grounds to what they (and Searle) would call the classical canon of pictorial representation. By arguing (correctly) that the vanishing point is at the far, open door and that the mirror on the wall cannot be reflecting the king and queen standing before the picture but must represent the king and queen as they are depicted on the hidden canvas, they think that they have ruled out the paradoxical nature of Velázquez's work. But as Leo Steinberg wrote recently, the mirror appears to reflect *not only* the king and queen painted on the hidden canvas, but also, and contradictorily, the king and queen as they stand beside the viewer in front of the picture. Ambiguity remains. See John Searle, "Las Meninas and Representation," *Critical Inquiry* 6 (1980), 477-88; Joel Snyder and Ted Cohen, "Reflections on Las Meninas: Paradox Lost," *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980), 429-47; Leo Steinberg, "Velazquez' Las Meninas," *October* 15 (1981), 45-54.

11. In 1656, at the time of her portrayal in *Las Meninas*, Margarita was five years old. She and her stepsister, Maria Teresa (soon to be married to Louis XIV of France) were the only surviving children of Philip IV.
12. For a discussion of this painting which is owned by the Grovesnor Estate in England see Enriqueta Harris, "Velazquez's Portrait of Prince Baltasar Carlos in the Riding School," *The Burlington Magazine* 118 (1976), 266-75.
13. See Jonathan Brown and J. H. Elliott, *A Palace for a King* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1980), p. 56 and pp. 253-54.
14. For a passing remark to this effect see John H. Elliott, *Imperial Spain 1469-1716* (London: Edward Arnold Ltd., 1963), p. 381. Velázquez, after all, chose to devote almost his entire working life to advancement in and depiction of the Spanish court. One can usefully contrast his art in this regard to the works of Manet. This nineteenth century French painter, who admired Velázquez before all other artists, had neither a court nor Velázquez's sustaining trust in representation. The very quality of Manet's painted surfaces reveals as much.