

Los Papeles de Velázquez

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A hand emerges from a lace cuff, and droops over the arm of a chair. It is painted impressionistically, and appears relaxed. Yet clutched between the thumb and forefinger, a folded sheet of paper twists awkwardly, contravenes perspective, and pushes forward to petition the viewer. This small dramatic detail, set against a velvet backcloth, is a fragment of a full-length portrait of Archbishop Fernando de Valdés.¹ The exactingly carefree brushstrokes and inscription on the contorted sheet identify Velázquez as its painter. Whoever cut this fragment from the larger canvas, considering perhaps that value resided in its signature, may have unintentionally revealed something hidden in the larger composition; the artist's aspiration inscribed on an imaginary sheet of paper.²

My interest in Velázquez's papers was sparked one evening by a friend, who, having recently returned from Madrid, handed me two slides purchased from the Prado. 'I thought', she said, 'that these might interest you'. As I held them to the light, she

pointed out tiny scraps of paper secreted in the corners of Velázquez's *Lances* and *Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV*. 'These bits of paper serve no purpose in the paintings', she declared with mild indignation, 'they are blank'. Could I explain them? I shook my head. A tiny scrap of paper buried in a composition, we reasoned, might carry an inscription or a signature, but blank slips were either an enigma or an oversight. 'Had someone, perhaps Velázquez, over-painted them?' 'Had he overlooked to sign these paintings off?' 'Might similar fragments, half-hidden in other paintings, provide more clues?' 'What messages or meanings lay buried in these unwritten documents?' were questions that we raised, but had no means to answer. So, in the days that followed, I resolved to investigate the artist through the narrow prism of his papers.

Velázquez was born into a world overwhelmed by paper. But early seventeenth century Spanish paintings, commissioned almost exclusively by religious orders and rigorously controlled by the Inquisition, had

little space for this ubiquitous material. Its restrained appearances were restricted to a devotee's book, or a scroll from which the angels sing. Then suddenly, and without fanfare, Velázquez extended paper in new dimensions. Folded and torn, printed or blank, clinging to rocks, and piled on the floor, he turned paper into a petition, a prop and a clue to his subject's station. He painted *Francisco Lezcano* holding playing cards, to symbolise his idleness; *Menippus* turning away from learning, and an open book; and the bureaucrat *El Primo*, dwarfed by an enormous tome.³ In other paintings, important men hold single sheets of paper in their hands. But, with the exception of *Mother Jerónima de la Fuente*, who clasps a prayer book, and wealds a crucifix as if it was an axe, Velázquez never allowed paper to fall into a woman's hand.⁴

Shortly after his appointment to the court of Philip IV, Velázquez painted full-

length portraits of the King and his brother Infante Don Carlos. The two men were remarkably alike. They shared the family's ugliness. Their attitudes, with feet apart and torsos slightly twisted to the left, were almost identical.⁵ But there is one distinguishing feature. The Infante dangles a glove from his right hand. The King clasps a letter to his side. Why, I wondered, was the most powerful man on earth bereft of all regalia? How, and why, could a single sheet of paper distinguish Philip from his brother, and endow the King with absolute authority? And what secrets were folded in those other letters, painted by Velázquez, in the hands of Archbishop Fernando de Valdés, and Pope Innocent X.⁶

In seeking answers to these puzzles, I explored the papers in Velázquez's paintings, the documents that traced his life, and a third strand that ties these things together, but which, to English speakers, seems a



less obvious attribute of paper. In English, paper is a material thing. Its makers call the raw ingredient ‘stuff’. But in Spanish, *papel* (paper) also means an occupation, task or duty. It is akin to the English word ‘role’ which is derived from the ‘roll of paper’ on which an actor’s lines are written. Roles, or in Spanish *papeles*, create social cohesion, legitimise behaviour, and sanction power. But they are capricious, and subject to revision. In a period spanning a little over four decades Velázquez rose from the streets of Seville, to become a knight, and an intimate member of the most powerful court in Europe. He was an artist who painted paper; a servant, turned courtier and politician. He married the arts to an authoritarian state ideology, yet laid the foundations of modernist painting. His papers offer insights into these apparent contradictions, and reveal how Velázquez reinvented himself, embezzled, lied, deceived and imaginatively displaced his King.

In the mid-sixteenth century Velázquez’s Portuguese grandparents migrated to Seville: gateway to the Americas and city of opportunity for merchants, lawyers, artisans and thieves. Silver and gold poured in from the New World. Adventurers, priests and slavers poured out from the old. In a little over a century Seville was transformed from a small village on the great Guadalquivir River into the third most important city in Europe. It was a metropolis of ostentatious display, where paper meant everything and nothing. Qualifications could be easily assumed, or bought. The judiciary was notoriously corrupt, and legal judgements openly sold.⁷ A large professional class of lawyers wangled and recorded all ‘legitimate’ transactions. Wills, marriage contracts, property inventories, powers of attorney, loans, official ordinances and petitions, claims and counterclaims before the Court and Inquisition, were all arranged in legal jargon, and set down on paper. Velázquez was a child of this world. His father was a notary.

He also knew another world; *el Hampa* (the underworld). Seville’s rapid expansion attracted countless migrants from the countryside. Many, deracinated and unabsorbed by legal commerce, begged,

stole, or traded their bodies in the streets. The city’s criminal fraternities, with their apprentices and masters, registers and rules, were parodies of medieval guilds. They held depositories of loot, from which to pay *‘the lawyer who defends us, the constable who tips us off, and the executioner who shows us mercy.’*⁸ They held territories controlled by *Jácaros* (bullies) and *rufos* (ruffians), who imposed beatings, murdered to order and politely opened doors to brothels. Their specialist trades included *cortabolsas* (cutpurses), *duendes* (sneak thieves), *capeadores* (cloaksnatchers) and *devotos* (despoilers of images). Barriers between *el Hampa* and legitimate society were porous. Criminal slang (*germania*) invaded popular speech, syphilis was rife, and religious houses offered sanctuary to anyone pursued by secular authority. Consequently, the cathedral courtyards, *Corral de los Olmos* and *Corral de las Naranjas*, with their cheap eating houses (*bodegones*) became operational centres for Seville’s criminal societies.⁹ On special occasions, such as a public execution, these fraternities would hire the finest mourning clothes, organise triumphant processions of vagabonds, and chant litanies to their soon-to-be martyred friends.¹⁰ Velázquez was born into the centre of this Golden Age, where ambition and imagination were intimately entwined. He grew up surrounded by the world of *el Hampa*, and the world of the well-to-do. Two themes recur throughout his paintings; he sought to visually unite two disparate worlds, and to elevate the status of the lowliest of things. One theme runs throughout his career; Velázquez was a social climber.

The artist’s baptism, by Licenciado Gregorio de Salazar, was recorded in the register of the Church of San Pedro, Seville, on 6th June 1599.¹¹ On 17th October 1611 Juan Rodriguez signed an apprenticeship document for this child, declaring that

‘as a legitimate father and administrator who is for the good of Diego Velázquez, my son of more or less 12 years ... I place to learn the art of painting with Francisco Pacheco, master of the said art and neighbour of the said city in the collection of San Miguel



*for a time and space of six years... that you will teach him the said, your art, well, and completely, following what you know, without concealing anything.*¹²

Painting in early seventeenth-century Seville was a trade of low social-standing. It ranked alongside cobbler or sieve-maker. But Francisco Pacheco was ambitious. Born in 1564 to a humble family and christened Francisco Pérez y Rio, he assumed the name of an uncle, a respected local cleric, Canon Pacheco. He joined literary discussion circles and collected books on art. He slavishly copied classical models, and gained prestigious commissions. He established an important studio, became a member of the Inquisition, and dreamed of elevating the

status of his craft. He accepted the child Diego as an apprentice, and on 14th March 1617, ‘in the presence of Pedro del Caprio public scribe and familiar (member) of the holy office of the Inquisition’ he formally honoured his agreements, declaring ‘that the full examination certificate be given to him (Diego) along with the licence to use his said art in this city and in whatever places and parts.’¹³

Shortly after this ceremony, Velázquez married Pacheco’s daughter, but rejected his master’s style. In a move unprecedented in Spanish art, Velázquez trained his brushes on *el Hampa*, and painted lowlifes, eating, carousing, and counting out their coins.¹⁴ Paper is absent from these paintings. The

subjects have no need of it. But stacks of paper stand behind them. They are the pages in Pacheco's books, which explained the principles of perspective, anatomy and geometry, praised the lives of artists, and told how, in ancient times, Peiraikos gained the highest esteem by painting the lowliest of subjects.¹⁵ Velázquez employed this tactic

and transcribed the whores and villains of Cervantes, from prose to paint.

In one tavern scene, a hat and collar hang menacingly on the wall. They seem to imply both an absence and a presence. Beside them, barely visible in the gloom, a sword casts the shadow of a cross. A mischievous young man proffers a flask of



wine, and smiles towards the viewer. Yet his gesture is ambiguous. Are we invited to a celebration? Or might he smash us in the face? An old man, seated at a table, averts his gaze, and stares into a distance. Opposite him a second youth looks directly to our eyes, gives a 'thumbs-up', and smirks. Could this seemingly friendly gesture imply a stabbing? A knife-blade points towards his chest. Its handle protrudes beyond the table's edge. It seems so real that we are tempted to reach out and grasp it in self-defence.¹⁶ 'I would prefer', Velázquez reputedly said 'to be the first in that sort of coarseness than second in delicacy.'¹⁷ But this statement belies the delicacy of his eye, and the chimera in his coarseness. In the *Water-Seller of Seville*, the world of *el Hampa* meets the world of the well-to-do. Yet their encounter seemingly holds no threat. Light bathes the imperfections of an earthenware pitcher, and is absorbed in a stain of trickling water. Radiance is cooled in crystal, and bounces off translucent pearls. An old man, who no doubt could tell a tale or two, dominates the composition. His skin is tanned. His hand is steady. There are no ripples in the water that he passes to a decorous and well-dressed youth.¹ Yet submerged beneath the surface of these paintings are illusions, allegories and puns, and within their restricted frames

the world turns inside-out. An old and lowly rogue offers sacrament and succour. An adolescent country girl is transformed into the Holy Virgin, and the base materials of earth and ochre are imbued with heavenly grace.¹⁹

To unite two worlds within a single image, an artist need do little more than place two characters side by side. Difference, and the transience of an encounter, may be implied through dress, interaction and demeanour. But to unite two worlds, while simultaneously making the viewer conscious of their separation, is a far more difficult task. It requires the demarcation of spaces that are connected yet distinct. Velázquez struggled with this problem in his painting of *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1618).²⁰ A disconsolate girl grinds garlic and chilli, and casts a sullen eye towards the viewer. She prepares a simple meal, but is admonished by the pointing finger of an older woman standing at her side. To the right, a different scene unfolds. Perhaps reflected in a mirror, or viewed through a serving hatch, Christ rests in the sisters' house. Mary, sits at his feet. Sibling rivalry is in the air. Martha appeals to Jesus, 'Lord, is it of no concern of thine that my sister has left me to serve alone.'²¹ But he dismisses this concern. 'Martha, thou art anxious and troubled



about many things; and yet only one thing is needful, Mary has chosen the best part, and it will not be taken from her.' As the viewer's eye darts between these narratives, it journeys from a sixteenth-century Spanish kitchen to the biblical past, and vice versa. The image is an expression of Reformation teaching, which sought to reconcile spiritual revelation with the everyday, but it is equally an attempt to fuse divergent worlds that have been tempestuously rent apart.

At the age of 24, Velázquez travelled to Madrid, and was appointment portrait painter to the King. He remained at court for thirty seven-years, where he slowly rose within its ranks.

6 October 1623: Appointed *Pintor Real* (Royal Painter).²²

14 October 1626: Awarded an Ecclesiastical Pension.²³

7 March 1627: Appointed xxxxxxxxxxxx Usher of the Chamber²⁴ - a role equivalent to a porter.²⁵

28 July 1636: Appointed *Ayuda de Guardarropa* (Assistant to the Wardrobe) and granted a key to the King's bedchamber.²⁶

6 January 1643: Appointed *Ayuda de Cámara* (Assistant to the Privy Council).²⁷

9 June 1643: Appointed *Ayuda de Superintendencia de las Obras Particulares* (Assistant to the Superintendent of Private Works).²⁸

22 January 1647: Appointed *Veedor de das obras de La Pieza Ochavada del Alcázar* (Overseer of the Octagonal Room in the Alcazar).²⁹

16 February 1652: Appointed *Aposentador Mayor de Palacio* (Palace Marshal), in the face of considerable opposition.³⁰

28 November 1659: Granted *Cédula de Concesión de Hidalguía* (admitted to the nobility, and appointed a Member of the Order of Santiago).³¹

These roles (*papeles*) carried privileges and powers. They were accumulated and simultaneously held. As *Aposentador Mayor de Palacio*, Velázquez was accountable for the plumbing and the pleasures of the court. He controlled an army of cleaners, skivvies, builders, bureaucrats and painters. He organised tournaments and concerts, replaced worn-out matting, stockpiled firewood, painted portraits, and curated the greatest art collection in the world. Velázquez had, and could arrange for others, privileged access to the King. He controlled seating arrangements at official events, and the public display of status within the court. Papers, protocols and rules fuelled this apparatus of maintenance and display, and transformed simple mundane acts, such as the daily delivery of bread to the King's table, into elaborate parades.

Proceeding the King's mealtime the *Mayordormo* of the Week notified the quartermaster's store, the kitchen, the wine-cellar, the bakery and the sauce-room, before overseeing the Upholsterer, who laid-out the great carpet, and the Quartermaster, who placed upon it the Royal Table and Chair. The Usher of the Hall then alerted all officials, whose attendance as spectators was required, and directed the Gentleman of the Mouth (*Gentilhombre de la Boca*) to the bakery. On his arrival there, a folded napkin was placed on this Gentleman's left shoulder, and the Baker kissed and presented him with the Royal Salt-cellar. The Gentleman of the Mouth's valet was given a knife, napkin and bread, the precise handling of which was rigorously set-out. The Butler of the Kitchen, with tablecloths held in the left hand, and dishes held the right, joined this entourage, along with an Aide of the Bakery, who carried spoons, more napkins and the Royal Tooth-pick Holder. Twelve soldiers, four Spanish, four German, and four Burgundian, accompanied this procession to the Royal Table, where Velázquez, who, as *Aposentador Mayor de Palacio*, was responsible for the smooth functioning of these rituals, waited kneeling behind the Royal Chair.³²

Paper's dominance of Court life is evident in the duties of Velázquez's subjects. Diego De Acedo (*El Primo*), was a bureaucrat and a dwarf. Velázquez painted him seated on



a low pedestal, and emphasised his stature by placing an enormous book across his knees. His nickname is ambiguous. *El Primo*, was, and is, a privileged form of address between the nobles and the King, but it more commonly denotes a dupe or fool. It is the perfect epithet for his role. *El Primo* worked for the Secretary of the Privy Council. His sole task was to apply a stamp of the King's signature to papers, as, when and where the

secretary directed.³³

For Philip IV, paper was the central nervous system of the kingdom he inherited, and the source and symbol of his power. Its authority had grown with empire. In 1489, with the aim of improving communications throughout his domains, Fredrick III granted a mail monopoly to Francisco Tassi. As the Hapsburg Empire expanded, this system grew within it. By the early sixteenth-century

the Tassi family (renamed Taxi) employed thousands of messengers to operate a European postal network, with staging posts at twenty-eight mile intervals.

Philip IV's grandfather, Philip II, inherited much of this empire, and amassed the greatest fortune ever gathered. He squandered it on his dual passions: art, and war against the heretics. He became so reliant on the postal service that it shaped his view of government. Philip II declined direct contact with diplomats and ministers, and insisted that all communication be committed to paper. He located his court in a small village (Madrid), which, unlike other European capitals, was far from the sea and had no navigable river, but it was the centre of the peninsular and a vast postal network. Philip II constructed the monastery *El Escorial*, and withdrew there to work ceaselessly, alone in an office, drowning in paperwork. He is known as *El Rey Papelero*, the Paper-working King. In a three-quarter-length portrait, painted around 1594, he appears dignified and sombre.³⁴ He needed neither crown nor sceptre to symbolise his power. He simply held a sheet of paper in his hand. When Velázquez came to paint the portraits of Philip II's heirs, the Infante Don Carlos and Philip IV, he reasserted the aesthetic sobriety of their grandfather, and placed a glove in the hand of the former, and a single sheet of paper in the hand of the King.³⁵

Velázquez was not the first artist to scatter paper in his paintings or scribble his signature on these apparently discarded notes. El Greco painted a piece of litter, lying on the floor at the feet of a Cardinal, and inscribed it with his name.³⁶ Titian painted portraits of Doge Nicolo Marcello and Pope Paul III, clutching papers in their hands.³⁷ But, like Velázquez's early portraits of Philip IV, these letters made no open declaration, nor indicated a close connection between the artist and the sitter; they are respectful of an etiquette of distance. Occasionally, when genuine intimacy is acknowledged, the artist's signature, or message, moves closer to the subject. This occurs in two of Titian's portraits. Antoine Perronot de Gansville holds a letter in his hand, while a second letter, in the painting's bottom right, contains

the master's signature.³⁸ In the other painting the sitter holds a letter, which describes him as Titian's unique friend.³⁹

Velázquez was not the first Spanish artist to employ papers in this way, but he appreciably raised the stakes.⁴⁰ His notes are either blank, when they seemingly ought to bear a signature, as in the *Lances*, and *Equestrian Portrait of Philip IV*, or they are prominently inscribed with the artist's name, and carried by a distinguished hand. These letters distort the conventional distance between the painter and his subject, and turn eminent men into the artist's messenger. Remember, they somehow seem to say; *'Diego Velázquez y de Silva painted this painting, and wrote this letter. Regard how his subject thinks about its content, even as he stands before you.'* But they also served another purpose. Velázquez wrote petitions to the King and Pope, and he used his privileged access to deliver them in person.⁴¹ He requested the things that only they could grant. A raise in salary, a knighthood, a certificate to establish the purity of his birth and secure his family's future.

In 1629, following Ruben's visit to the Madrid court, Philip IV agreed to one of these requests. Pacheco describes the event in his biography of his son-in-law.

*'And to fulfil his great desire to see Italy, and the great things therein, and having promised it to him several times, he made good his royal word and, encouraging him greatly, gave him leave and four-hundred ducats in silver for his trip by having him paid his salary of two years. And when he took his leave from the Count Duke, he gave him another two-hundred ducats in gold, and a medal with the portrait of the King and many letters of recommendation.'*⁴²

The voyage was a great privilege for a Spanish artist; few had gone before him. But some eyes regarded the journey with suspicion. The Tuscan ambassador to Madrid, Averardo Medici di Castellina, wrote cautioning his brother, the Archbishop of Piza about this *'low-spaniard'*, and Flavio Atti, the ambassador for the Duke of Palma and Piacenza, after providing Velázquez with a formal letter of introduction, immediately sent a coded message home: *'part of this*



painter's ploy', he noted, *'is to reap some harvest by getting gifts from everyone.'* But his conclusion that Velázquez was an avaricious social climber was less significant than his other accusation. *'I say'* Atti reported, *'that he is going to spy'*. Alvise Mocengio, the Venician ambassador, had had similar misgivings before concluding that *'his journey is not suspect'*; however Mocengio preceded to advise the Venetian Senate to *'draw your own prudent conclusions on how best to deal with him.'*⁴³

Before departing, Velázquez painted the divided worlds of ancient myth and earthly peasants, of Bacchus consoling mortals with his wine. The image is akin to the earlier encounter between the water-seller and the well-to-do young man, with roles reversed. A youthful god offers a crown of vine-leaves and a chalice to the poor. Yet the pictorial space is unconvincing, uncomfortable and cramped. The peasants are squashed together in a lump.⁴⁴ In Italy, Velázquez painted a not dissimilar encounter, albeit one between two gods. Apollo, radiant and golden, stands in Vulcan's forge. But the spatial drama is of a different order. The

crippled blacksmith is arrested at his anvil, his head recoils in horror at the Sun God's tale. His assistants' faces, limbs and torsos are transfixed, and hang on Apollo's every word.⁴⁵ In a companion painting of a biblical subject, a similar revelatory drama unfolds. Joseph's brothers present a bloodstained coat to their father Jacob, who lurches forward in distress. The perspective is unnerving. The sight-line is situated on the painting's extreme left. The vanishing point, located at a protruding vertebra on the twisted torso of a shame-faced youth, is an axis around which the tragedy unfolds.⁴⁶

In Italy, Velázquez did not simply master perspective; he embraced it as a narrative device and wielded it to explore the one subject of interest to artists, spies and those who are caught between two worlds; deceit. Joseph's brothers are transposed in their act of deception. And Apollo, by shining light upon the world, revealed the infidelity of the blacksmith's spouse, Venus, whom he had spied in the arms of Mars.

Other Italian influences along with an autodidactic quest for knowledge, are evident in Velázquez's personal library. Following







his death in 1660, the artist's personal goods were impounded, pending an investigation of larceny. The inventory lists many items: silks, jewels, hats, personalised medallions from the Pope, and one hundred and fifty-four books, half of which were Italian and with the exception of four or five in Latin, the rest were Spanish. Religion and frivolity were almost entirely absent from the catalogue. There were two devotional works, one trivial novel, three books of poetry and one on music; but ten books on art techniques, three on anatomy, seven on perspective, five on geometry, twenty-one on architecture, sixteen

on mathematics, and six volumes on the lives of artists. The Velázquez that emerges from his bookshelves is a practical and ambitious man. He is rational and scientific, interested in the physicality of the natural and man-made worlds. There were books about the mechanics of sun-clocks and astrolabes, and books on archaeology, medicine and maps, but there were also texts that paint a different picture. Velázquez possessed four works on astrology and divination, which imply more than a passing interest in destiny prefigured in the stars. He also owned the manual which had caused him so much grief: *La Regla y*

Establecimientos de la Orden de Santiago (The Rule and Statutes of the Order of Santiago).⁴⁷

Founded in the twelfth-century and modelled on the Knights Templar, *The Order of Santiago* was the largest of Spain's three Aristocratic institutions. This religious-military nobility had led the Christian re-colonisation of the peninsula's southern territories, and the battle against Islam. By the early sixteenth-century, the Orders had shed their military significance, but retained their basis as religious institutions. Their members were officially monks, but not just any monks; for reasons of national identity and pride, they were monks from old noble Christian families, (*hidalgos*) legitimately born, uncontaminated by Arab or Jewish blood, (*limpia de sangre*), and free from the stain of manual labour. But, during the reign of Philip IV and his Sevilliano first-minister, the Count-Duke of Olivares, if you had the right connections and sufficient money, these matters could easily be certified and resolved.

Olivares was, by the evidence of Velázquez's portraits of him, a barrel of a man. He ascended to power alongside the young King in 1621 and was the principal power behind the throne for over two decades. He introduced the culture of Seville and many of its townsfolk, including Velázquez, to Madrid, and brought the wiles of the southern upstart city to the court. Olivares unashamedly sold court favours, but, as the following witness suggests, a battery of lawyers and theologians were required to legitimise these proceedings.

'His Majesty decided that three hundred hábitos (knighthoods) should be conferred, each for a certain sum in silver, so that the resultant yield might help to defray the expenses of the war in Catalonia and Portugal. Before His Majesty issued the necessary decree, however, he assembled councils of distinguished lawyers, who met together with many learned theologians, to debate the matter, and to safeguard his majesty's conscience. They ruled that His Majesty might distribute the hábitos to his vassals for a silver payment, without incurring the sin of simony, and His Majesty

*thereupon resolved to execute the matter.'*⁴⁸

The archives of Spain's aristocratic Orders reveal the extent of this cash for honours system. In the hundred years between 1521 and 1620, the average annual award of knighthoods in the largest Order, Santiago, was eighteen. In the first five years of Philip IV and Olivares's government, this figure leaped to one hundred and three, and during the subsequent twenty-five years, it was sustained at an average of eighty-nine new knighthoods per annum.⁴⁹

Given this profligacy, and the Royal esteem in which Velázquez was undoubtedly held, his long struggle to attain a knighthood appears remarkable, and indicates the strength of opposition to his goal. Velázquez's court nickname *El Sevilliano* (the Servillian) implies a dubious reputation, which would not have endeared him to conservative elements within the court. In seeking admission to the Order of Santiago, he faced two important obstacles: he had to prove descent from a noble family, and demonstrate that he had not engaged in manual labour for financial reward. But as the King's official portrait painter, who received a salary for this duty, and as an artisan who regularly accepted commissions, any suggestion that he met this condition was self-evidently a lie. His best bet was to circumvent the rules.

Velázquez journeyed to Italy a second time, leaving Madrid in November 1648, and returning in June 1651. Shortly after arriving in Rome, in May 1649, he painted a portrait of Pope Innocent X, in which the wily Holy Father holds a petition in his hand.⁵⁰ This detail was no afterthought. It was included in an early sketch.⁵¹ Neither was it a convenient space for the artist's brazen signature. It is clearly a petition from the painter to the Pope: *'Alla Sant^{ta} di Nro. Sig^{re} Innocenti X^o Per Diego de Silva Velazquez dela Camera de S. M^{ta} Catt.^{co}'* We do not know the letter's contents, but on 17 December 1650, Cardinal Panciroli wrote a letter from Rome, to the Nuncio in Madrid, which praised Velázquez for his portraiture, and supported his appointment to the Order of Santiago.⁵² A second letter, dated 2nd August 1651, was dispatched from Cardinal Giulio Rospigliosi, Nuncio in Madrid, to Cardinal Pamphillii in Rome.⁵³ It too supported Velázquez's



ennoblement and requested the Vatican's endorsement. But this short campaign was ineffective. So Velázquez took a different tack: he ennobled himself in paint.

Las Meninas is his most famous work. It is a primary reference for modernist painting: the inspiration behind impressionist brushstrokes and abstract expressionists' hurling pigment at the floor. It is the source of Salvador Dalí's silly moustache, and the very symbol of Spanish national pride. It is a labyrinth, a paradox, the jewel of the Prado, and a best-selling fridge magnet.⁵⁴ It is, by the standards of Hapsburg portraiture, remarkably informal. The title draws our

attention to the foreground scene, where the young Infanta Margarita holds centre stage, and gazes inquisitively towards the viewer. She is bathed in light, and encircled by two maids of honour (*las Meninas*). To her left, a midget, who gently kicks and teases an obliging hound, initially distracts us. Then our attention is drawn to Mari Bárbola, the dwarf, standing just behind this scene. She too gazes outwards. Older, dark-haired and ugly, she counterpoises the pretty, fair, young princess. Their dresses, one white, tinged with black, the other black, tinged with white, emphasise their binary opposition. To the left, stepping from behind a large canvas,

poised with brush and palette, thinking rather than painting, Velázquez emerges from the shadows. At first glance this appears to be a relaxed domestic scene. It is the artist, in his studio, surrounded by his models. But who, or what, is he painting? The subject stands outside the image, and is invisible. He, or she, is defined by what they see, rather than how they are seen. In other words, Velázquez has turned the conventions of representation inside out. He exchanged his role (*papel*) with his subject, and substituted his own point of view with theirs. This daring act is all the more audacious when we realise whose eyes perceive this scene. A mirror on the back wall reflects their image. It is the King and Queen.

Philip IV frequently visited Velázquez in his workshop, where he would sit and chat, and watch the artist painting. The studio would therefore have been familiar to him. It would seemingly pose no threat, nor imply a site of insubordination. To create a portrait of the King, from the King's own point of view, may be interpreted as an inspired act of flattery. Yet Velázquez laid clues, which imply a radically different interpretation. On the face of things the artist appears to look towards the King, who stands beyond the picture frame. But in so doing, he turns his back upon the Royal portrait in the mirror, and looks towards whichever viewer stands before the image. If we ask; what is Velázquez actually looking at? We realise that he has displaced the King entirely with another mirror, and is gazing at his own reflection, standing at the centre of the court. It is an image that fulfils Pacheco's aspiration, to elevate the status of the painter and his craft. But it is enacted with thechutzpah of an *el Hampa* vagabond, decked-out in the finery of a trampled lord. Standing before the finished painting Philip would have seen his own reflection in the rear-wall mirror. He would have seen Velázquez, silently declaring himself creator, manipulator and master of the Royal image. And he would have seen the cavernous space rising darkly above this worldly drama. Hidden in its penumbra two paintings hang high on the studio's rear wall. They are copies of works by Rubens that depict mythological conflicts, but they also present warnings to the King. In the painting

to the right, Pan and Apollo engage in a musical competition. First Pan, the god of earthly substance, sensuality and sex played upon his pipes; the animals and the humans were entranced. Then Apollo struck his lyre, and the heavens were transfixed. Tmolus, the old god of the mountains, was called upon to moderate the tournament, and chose Apollo's side. When King Midas refused to accept this judgement, Apollo cursed him with ass-shaped ears. It is a cautionary tale to any monarch, whose aesthetic judgement may be faulted. In the other painting, of Arachne and Minerva, the battle between the lowly and the lofty is intensified. Arachne, as Ovid suggests, '*was renowned not for her birthplace or her family...she was lowborn... Yet consummate work had won the girl much fame*'.⁵⁵ Declaring her skills equal to the goddess of poetry, wisdom and craft, Arachne challenged Minerva to a competition. The not-so-humble artisan and the Goddess of the Arts each wove a tapestry. Minerva crafted a hallucinatory vision of divine authority and hate. Set to remind mortals that they should never challenge gods, she delighted in the vengeful chill of beauties transfigured into stone, and the screech of humans turned to birds, while she, Minerva, stood victorious amidst the greatest deities.

Arachne chose to remind Minerva of her father's *peccadillos*. Her tapestry revealed Jove's divine deceits and rapes: as Zeus, masquerading as a bull to carry off Europa; taking Leda disguised as a swan; in the form of a Satyr, to have his way with Antiope; impersonating her husband to deceive Alcmena; impregnating Danae as a shower of gold; abandoning Aegina, to avoid her father's wrath; and lest Minerva forget, Arachne threw in Jove's nine-night ravaging of Mnemosyne, the goddess of memory, who subsequently bore the nine muses. And then she interwove the crimes of Neptune. There was no question that the artistry of the rivals was equal. But Arachne challenged more than the talent of a Goddess, she revealed the Gods' debasement and corruption. Her transgressive threads screamed at Minerva, you are nothing but the daughter of a rapist and a crook; you are a mind-fuck, a bastard, and a great celestial wank. For Minerva's conception was itself



extraordinary and contentious; she was the product of Jove's cerebral ejaculation, who leaped fully-formed directly from her father's mind. Arachne's audacity provoked Minerva's fury. The Goddess tore the offending tapestry to shreds, and proceeded to beat her rival with a spindle. Finally she lamented, and cursing her mortal challenger to eternally weave her husband's shrouds, Minerva turned Arachne into a spider.

There is no doubt that Velázquez was enamoured of this myth. He executed his own interpretation of it while painting *Las Meninas*. *Las Hilanderas* (the Spinners) is yet another image of two disjointed worlds.⁵⁶ In a distant room, five female occupants, suffused in light, repose in shimmering silks. In the foreground a different scene unfolds. Five women are gathered in a dingy workshop. One is picking up, or putting down a basket full of woven cloth, another theatrically pulls back a curtain. Between them three women labour at carding, spinning and winding yarn. Superficially *Las Hilanderas* is an image that contrasts the segregated realms of making and display; of a world subsumed by earthly shadows, and another bathed eternal light. It presents the apparently irreconcilable division between mutability and divine order, between the workshop and the court; between the likes of Velázquez

and the aristocracy to which he aspired. But these workaday women are foils for the Fates who, with faces turned like aspects of the moon, spin, measure and cut the thread of life. Their sister Fortune blindly oversees this work, and hovers above a prosaic, yet symbolic, 'spinning wheel'. Immediately beneath her, two lengths of wood cast the shadow of the cross, the symbol of the Order of Santiago. Looking deeper into the distant room, the viewer sees Arachne as she reveals her tapestry to Minerva. The rivals are accompanied by the three graces: Aglaia (Splendor), Euphrosyne (Joy) and Thalia (Flowers), who rule the muses and ensure the permanence of art. Arachne's tapestry is still complete. The human artisan is, as yet, unharmed. Velázquez chose to halt the action at this moment, when Minerva and Arachne stood as equal talents. Interwoven with his narrative are references that would have been obvious to the King; Arachne's tapestry is *The Rape of Europa*, painted by Titian for Philip II. The three Graces evoke Rubens's *Garden of Love*, which hung in Philip IV's bedchamber. Both artists were knighted for their service to the Hapsburg crown. Then Velázquez's employed a final twist. A close inspection of his Fates reveals that their ages and their actions are reversed. Atropos is deep in shadow, slumped deathlike at the

centre of the group. It is she whose task it is to cut the thread of life, yet in Velázquez's painting she performs the earliest of the spinning tasks. She cards the tangled fibres from which Clotho spins the yarn. A mature yet vigorous Lachesis winds it, while the youngest member of the group ambiguously picks up or puts down the finished cloth.⁵⁷ In *Las Hilanderas* Velázquez holds a mirror to the myths, folds time back upon itself, and sets the stage for a mortal to stand equal to a God. He then inserted this proposition into the painting *Las Meninas*.

The most audacious feature of the Royal Portrait is the swathe of bare canvas that dominates its left-side. Through it, Velázquez represents painting's hidden aspect, the part that is normally turned to face the wall. But, in concealing his painting from the viewer, he reveals its material essence: the spinner's handy-work; the woof and weft that entwine Arachne's tapestry with his own art. And he displays his singular determination to turn things inside-out. But what is Velázquez painting on this hidden surface? The mirror on the rear-wall provides the answer. From the viewer's perspective, it reflects the image on the canvas. The King did not see himself directly in the mirror. He saw the reflection of his image as painted by Velázquez. Thus the artist assumed the role of educator, and shaper of the King's knowledge of himself, guiding, as it were, the leader through the infinite reflections of a metaphorical mirror that is art.⁵⁸

On 12 June 1658 Philip IV issued a warrant initiating the knighthood of Diego Silva Velázquez.

*'The King - Governor and those of my Council of the Orders of Santiago, Calatraua and Alcántara, whose everlasting administration I hold. To Diego Silva Velázquez I grant (as the present I give to him) the Habit of the Order of Santiago.'*⁵⁹

The warrant requested the Governor and Council to return in thirty days with their opinion of the applicant's suitability for admission by the Order. It was, by all appearance, a regal request for their seal of approval. But it didn't work out that way. Something made Velázquez uneasy.

On 29 June he issued a formal request that no investigation be made in Portugal, the homeland of his grandparents, on account of the difficulties involved in travelling there. He asked that the enquiry be confined to the Madrid Court, or, if needs be to Seville, the city of his birth, and as a final, and possibly desperate, concession he requested that any Portuguese investigation be confined to the region of Oporto.⁶⁰ The Council insisted that ceding to Velázquez's request would set a precedent that could lead to future abuse of the Order's admission standards. In other words, behind their formal proclamations, the opponents to *el Sevilliano's* knighthood were prepared to bare their teeth. In consideration of the applicant's proximity to the King, the Council proposed to confine its Portuguese enquiry, as requested, to the region of Oporto. And in the margins of their document Philip IV signed his name and scribbled his consent with the words *Hagasse assi* - 'Do it this way'.

In an extended warrant of 27th September 1658 the King declared the opening of an enquiry, which ordered archbishops, bishops, abbots, priors, prelates of all the churches, cathedrals, colleges, chief councillors of all the cities, villages, communities and congregations of his reign, along with the heads of the other holy orders, to open their libraries and archives to the enquiry into the purity of Velázquez's bloodline, and claim to the prior noble status of his family. And on the following 3rd October, Velázquez handed over three hundred silver ducados to the depository of the Order of Santiago, as a down-payment for the investigation. On the 20th of the same month, Don Fernando de Salcedo and Licenciado Loçano set out on an epic journey, in search of Velázquez's family papers. They took twelve days to cover the ninety-six leagues to the region of Monterrey, where they questioned thirty-five citizens, before journeying six days over twenty-eight more leagues to the city of Tuy, where they interviewed twenty-five more witnesses. They travelled to Vigo, in Spain's far north, and Seville in the far south. Salcedo laboured for one hundred and thirteen days in the enterprise and Loçano one hundred and twenty-one. They took scores of written testimonies, and many oral statements. They

examined the archives and records of civic and religious institutions along the way, and presented their findings to the Council of the Order of Santiago on 26th February 1659. The Council's subsequent report summarised the findings in the following words: *'the purity of all bloodlines was approved, the claim to nobility was dismissed due to lack of evidence, and it was ordered to contest the nobility of his lineage.'*⁶¹ In response Velázquez submitted additional papers, including the testimony of Seville's chief scribe, who attested to written evidence of the nobility of Velázquez's father, recorded in the city's archives. But this counter-claim, heard on the 2nd April, was likewise disapproved, and an announcement made that the investigation was closed. On the following day the King was advised that the only possible avenue available was to request a special dispensation for Velázquez from the Pope. Letters were immediately dispatched to Rome.

The Council's record of the events surrounding the reply, reveal something of the tension that surrounded Velázquez's bid for a knighthood.

*'And the Brief requested of His Holiness having arrived, diminutive, and in error, on 3rd August 1659, it was decreed by Your Majesty that, having recognised the stamp of the dispensation, to avoid delay and gain hours in the despatch, he ordered that despite it being a public holiday, the Council would gather in the Chairman's inn to expedite this business'.*⁶²

On the 28 November 1659, the following document was issued from the Council of the Order of Santiago to the King.

'Sir – The Brief, that Your Majesty was required to ask of His Holiness because of Diego de Silva Velazquez's lack of nobility in the paternal and maternal lines and without which the title of the Habit of the Order of Santiago, which Your Majesty granted in mercy, cannot be granted, has been presented in this Council and in conformity to it the title will later be given to him, proceeding this an act of ordinary warrant of an hidalgo

*is necessary, as is customary to give to those who suffer such defect, following the regulations of the same Order, and in this it is granted here for Your Majesty to sign, or further order of your royal service.'*⁶³

The timing of Velázquez's knighthood, and the King's commitment to it coincided with the artist's greatest organisational and ideological coup. Today he is remembered for a small oeuvre of around 120 paintings, and a handful of drawings. He is remembered as the great grandfather of modernist painting, who created startling illusions from simple smears of paint. He is not remembered as the courtier who set the stage for European peace, but this indeed was his final act. On the 7th November 1659, the French and Spanish Courts ended thirty years of war. The political reality was difficult; Spain was virtually bankrupt, yet needed to project the image of a superpower. Velázquez was in charge of all decorations, ceremonies and celebrations surrounding the negotiations. He crafted the image of the state and decorated the Palace with Spanish Grandeur. He made the triumph of Venus over Mars the unifying theme. He personally led the French delegation through the exhibitions, and orchestrated the concluding celebrations; the Marriage of the Spanish Princess Maria Teresa to the French King, Louis XIV. This ceremony took place on the Pyrenean boarder between the previously warring states. To build and decorate the Spanish Pavilions and transport the court, the *Aposentador Mayor de Palacio* employed a thirty-two kilometre long train; composed of 70 large and 32 smaller wagons, 70 horses, 500 pack, and 900 riding mules. He carried tapestries and cooks, paintings, barbers, furniture and jewels, along a 500 kilometre route, at the rate of eight to ten kilometres a day.⁶⁴ Throughout the pavilions he clothed the Spanish State in the image of the naked Goddess of Love. It was a prophetic act; Spain never managed to find the 500,000 gold-crown dowry that had been promised to the French, and this debt haunted the Hapsburg dynasty for its remaining forty-year reign. Velázquez returned to Madrid on 26 June. He collapsed from exhaustion four days later, and died on 6th August 1660.

In the *Las Meninas* self-portrait he



wears the red cross of the Order of Santiago upon his tunic. It was painted posthumously by another hand. Palomino, Velazquez's biographer, who was informed by courtiers that had witnessed the events, recorded how

some claimed that it was the King himself, who made this alteration to the painting. That Philip IV might have voluntarily exchanged his role (*papel*) with that of his portrait painter, is an intriguing thought.

1 The portrait is known from a copy in the collection of the Conde de Toreno, Madrid. There is debate over a second fragment in the National Gallery Collection, London, which depicts Valdes's head and upper torso. Brown doubts the attribution to Velázquez.

2 In 1989 the Valdés Hand mysteriously disappeared from the collection of the *Patrimonio Nacional*, Madrid. Its current whereabouts are unknown.

3 *Francisco Lezcano*, Madrid, Museo del Prado *Menippus*, Madrid, Museo del Prado; *El Primo*, Madrid, Museo del Prado

4 *Mother Jerónima de la Fuente*, Madrid, Museo del Prado; Madrid, Fernández de Aroaz.

5 The portrait of the king was subsequently repainted and the position of the feet altered. Its earlier state is known from copies.

6 *Innocent X*, Rome, Galleria Doria Pamphili.

7 See Pike, 1972, Chap 2, Sec 2.

8 Cervantes, cited by Pike, 1972, Chap 4, Sec 3.

9 The cathedral is located approximately one kilometre from Calle Gorgoja where Velázquez was raised (today named *Padre Luis Maria Llop*).

10 See Pike, 1972, Chap's 2,3,4.

11 Andrade, J. M. P. and Á. Fernández, 2000. Doc. 2

12 Ibid. Doc. 8

13 Ibid. Doc.10

14 Pacheco, F and A. Palomino. Trans. N.A.Mallory. Palomino (p 46) describes a lost painting of 'a poorly dressed lad with a little cloth cap on his head, counting money at a table and keeping tally with particular care on the fingers of his left hand.'

15 Peiraikos is known from Pliny, Natural History Vol. XXXV. Sánchez Canton, F. J. 1925, discusses the contents of Pacheco's library

16 *Three Men at Table*. Leningrad, Hermitage,

17 Palomino, A. Mallory, N.A. Trans. p 48.

18 *The Waterseller*. London, Wellington Museum,

19 *Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*. London, National Gallery.

20 *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha*. London, National Gallery,.

21 Gospel of Luke, 10:38-42

22 Andrade, J. M. P. and Á. Fernández, 2000. Doc. 23

23 Ibid. Doc xx

24 Ibid Doc xx

25 Goldberg E.L. Sept. 1992. cites Flavio Atti, p 453

26 Andrade, J. M. P. and Á. Fernández, 2000. Doc xx

27 Ibid Doc.164

28 Ibid. Doc xx

- 29 Ibid. Doc [xx](#)
- 30 Ibid. Doc [xx](#)
- 31 Ibid. Doc. 408.17
- 32 Riggs, A.S. Nov. 1947. p 505-507
- 33 Brown, J. and C. Garrido. 1998. pp 147-151
- 34 *Portrait of Philip II with Letter*. Madrid. El Escorial,
- 35 Brown, J.1986
- 36 *Portrait of a Cardinal*. New York, Metropolitan Museum.
- 37 *Doge Nicolo Marcello*. Rome, Pinacoteca Vaticana.;[Citation check this is right location](#)
- 38 [Citation Possibly 208 , 225, 226, 289 in Royal Soc Library.](#)
- 39 [Possibly 208 , 225, 226, 289 in Royal Soc Library](#)
- 40 Zubaran occasionally placed his signature on a small curling piece of paper located in a bottom corner of a painting. The earliest instance of which is 1616.
- 41 Car, D.W. Ed. 2006. p173.
- 42 Pacheco, A. Trans. N.A. Mallory. pp 32-34
- 43 Golding, E. L. 1992.
- 44 *Feast of Bacchus (Los Borrachos)*. Madrid, Museo del Prado.
- 45 *Forge of Vulcan*. Madrid, Museo del Prado.
- 46 *Joseph's Bloodied Coat Presented to Jacob*. Madrid. El Escorial,
- 47 Kahr, M. M. (Jun., 1975) p.241 footnotes, cite López_Rey's (1968), and D. de la Valgoma y Diaz-Varela's propositions that Velázquez's ambition for a knighthood stemmed from 1629 and 1636 respectively.
- 48 Wright, L.P. (May, 1969) p 56.
- 49 Wright, L.P. (May, 1969) .
- 50 *Innocent X*, Rome, Galleria Doria Pomphili
- 51 *Innocent X*, Toronto, Theodore A. Heinrich.
- 52 Brown, J. 1986. p 208
- 53 Andrade, J. M. P. and Á. Fernández, 2000. Doc.295.
- 54 *Las Meninas*, Museo del Prado, Madrid.
- 55 Ovid. Trans. A. Mandelbaum.1993. p 177.
- 56 *Las Hilanderas*, Madrid. Museo del Prado.
- 57 Stapleford, R. and J. Potter, 1997.
- 58 Snyder, J. (June 1985)
- 59 Andrade, J. M. P. and Á. Fernández, 2000. Doc 408.1

60 Ibid. Doc 408.2

61 Ibid. Doc 408.16

62 Ibid. Doc 408.16

63 Ibid. Doc 408.16

64 Gasta. C.M.

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