

**VELÁZQUEZ**



MASTERS OF ART

# VELÁZQUEZ

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Front Cover: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV*, 1656  
(detail, see page 103)

Frontispiece: Diego Velázquez, *Self-portrait*, c. 1645, Uffizi Galleries, Florence

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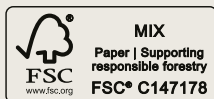
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# INTRODUCTION

Why, of all the painters of the Spanish Golden Age, does Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) grip viewers? Compared to Velázquez, we could say that El Greco is superior in pictorial invention, Zurbarán in faith, Murillo in sentiment, Cotán in the description of light. Yet Velázquez's insight into human character and understanding of paint and colour is unsurpassed. Carl Justi, a leading Velázquez scholar, puts it in a broader perspective: "Compared with Velázquez, Titian's colouring seems conventional, Rembrandt fantastic, and Rubens infected with a dash of unnatural mannerism."

When we think of Spain's *Siglo de Oro* (Golden Age) we are thinking of a seemingly paradoxical period. The era lasting roughly from 1590 (the consolidation of Spain's empire in the New World) to 1700 (the death of Charles II, Spain's last Hapsburg monarch) encompassed cultural achievements by Spanish writers and artists of remarkable heights, yet saw a decline in the country's economic prosperity, monarchical stability, military might and imperial territory. The story of Velázquez is intimately tied to the fortunes of his king and master, Philip IV, within whose court he spent his mature career. "He seems to have harbored two enormous, but mutually exclusive ambitions", as the modern scholar Jonathan Brown writes. "One was to be regarded as a great painter; the other was to be regarded as a great gentleman. In the rigid, hierarchical court of Philip IV, where painters were assigned a low rank, the realization of these ambitions came into deadly conflict."

A disastrous fire in 1734 at Madrid's Alcázar palace deprived us of masterpieces from the royal collection, including some by Velázquez. At least 40 of his paintings are now considered lost. While we may be forgiven for our disappointment that Velázquez's output was curbed by his court duties and reduced by these later losses, we should remember that the oeuvres of some great painters (for instance Giorgione, Vermeer, Leonardo and Géricault) are even more limited than his. Like Giorgione and Vermeer (not to mention his contemporaries Murillo and Zurbarán), Velázquez left no writings. His close observation in combination with portraiture being his primary subject – not forgetting a technique that was bewilderingly flexible – meant that his approach did not fit theoretical pronouncements and technical proscriptions.

Velázquez was called the "Spanish Apelles" during his own lifetime and won the admiration of Roman painters in 1650 with his painting of the Pope – a picture that was believed to match the masterpieces of papal portraiture by Raphael and Titian. His works were coveted after his death, but Velázquez's overall achievement was only indistinctly appreciated outside of Madrid for the 250 years after his death. He was never posthumously forgotten – as was his near contemporary Vermeer – but his art was so inaccessible that it was hard for painters to grasp its range and depth. Only with the opening of the Museo del Prado in 1819 was the royal collection made available to the public. It took until the opening of more efficient train and steamer travel – and the provision of more amenable hospitality – before the world made its way to Madrid. By "the world" I mean French writers and artists, who were the leading tastemakers of the nineteenth century.

What inarguably broadened adulation of Velázquez in that era was the fact that he was primarily a portraitist. For when we consider Velázquez, that is how we think of him: more than half of his 120 surviving paintings are single-figure portraits. In our own increasingly secular age (when religious sentiment is unfamiliar or troubling to many) it is easy to see why modern taste prefers Velázquez's portraiture over Zurbarán's religious subjects. Many have acclaimed the humanity apparent in his paintings of dwarfs and buffoons, although we must be cautious about ascribing our modern views to this notoriously distant painter.

A notable feature of his style was a vigorous and inventive brushwork. This optical shorthand coalesces into startling realism when viewed from a distance but closer up it breaks into exuberant abstraction. Velázquez's preeminent position is based on his painting style and lively colour combinations. Admiration of him by Manet, the Impressionists, Whistler, Picasso and Bacon has cemented Velázquez as a "painter's painter". Accordingly, Velázquez is considered the greatest of Spanish painters and one of the world's great artists. For the single achievement of having created *Las Meninas*, considered by some the greatest of all paintings, Velázquez richly deserves the admiration in which he is held.





# LIFE

