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Las Meninas, Alois Riegl, and the 'Problem' of Group Portraiture

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ABSTRACT. Velázquez's *Las Meninas* is often discussed by philosophers as some kind of puzzle to be solved. This can obscure its more straightforward status as a group portrait. This paper reconsiders the painting within the remit of what Alois Riegl terms the 'problem' of group portraiture: that is, how to unify a group as a pictorial composition without introducing too strong a narrative element that would ultimately distract from its function as portrait. Indeed, this is a painting that reflects upon the very nature of portraiture in all its guises. I will argue that *Las Meninas*, like Rembrandt's *The Syndics*, uses the novel device of the 'interruption' to solve this inherent problem of group portraiture by founding its internal coherence of the presence of an implied beholder; moreover, this a solution that can accommodate many of the painting's apparent ambiguities. But in so doing, the paper will contrast the communicative commonality of Rembrandt's great group portrait with Velázquez's aristocratic work, a private painting destined primarily for an audience of one.

I.

Since Michel Foucault's account of *Las Meninas* in *The Order of Things* (1974, pp. 3-16), Velázquez's painting [Figure 1] has maintained a pre-eminence in philosophical debates on representation and spectatorship. Indeed, this pre-eminence is such that it is now almost obligatory to offer some kind of apology for adding to the already substantial literature on this single work. As James Elkins notes in his book *Why are our Pictures Puzzles?* the literature on *Las Meninas* continues 'to spiral, with readings building on counter-readings' (1999, p. 40). Elkins offers few answers to the question he raises, other than to suggest that 'we are inescapably attracted to

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pictures that appear as puzzles, and unaccountably uninterested in clear meanings and manifest solutions' (p. 258).¹



FIGURE I. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656.
Museo del Prado, Madrid

This emphasis on the enigmatic or puzzling status of *Las Meninas* has largely obscured the more straightforward fact that it is a group portrait, at

¹ In a cautionary note, Elkins suggests that prior to Foucault the painting 'had to do with the Spanish court, with decorum and etiquette, and with transcendental technique: now, it has to do with cat's cradles of inferred lines, relative positions, possible viewers, and the many logical forms that follow from them' (1999, p. 42).

the centre of which is the Infanta Margarita, attended by two maids of honour (the *meninas* of the work's title). In this paper, I want to emphasise Velázquez's extraordinary contribution to the rethinking of the group portrait. While not referred to by Alois Riegl in his definitive *The Group Portraiture of Holland* (1999),² Margaret Iversen likewise observes that *Las Meninas* 'could be regarded as a demonstration piece of his principles of co-ordination and external coherence' (Iversen 1993, p. 142). These are principles that I will set out later. I want to flesh out Iversen's observation, and to argue that – like Rembrandt's *The Syndics* [Figure 2] – *Las Meninas* uses the novel device of the 'interruption' to solve an inherent problem of group portraiture: a solution that can accommodate many of the painting's apparent ambiguities. But in so doing, the paper will also contrast the communicative commonality of Rembrandt's great group portrait (so admired by Riegl) with Velázquez's aristocratic work, a private painting (despite its current location in the Prado) destined for an audience of one – namely its 'absent' subject, Philip IV.



FIGURE 2. Rembrandt van Rijn, *Syndics of the Draper's Guild*, 1662.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

² Not published in book form until 1931, 26 years after his death, Riegl's 'Das holländische Gruppenporträt' was first published in 1902 in *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen des Allerhöchsten Kaiserhauses* 23: 71-278.

2.

In Foucault's terms, *Las Meninas* is a 'representation as it were, of Classical representation' (1974, p. 16). Velázquez has placed himself prominently within the picture, poised, with loaded brush, in the very act of painting. Foucault's account famously emphasises that in 'the definition of the space it opens up to us' there is an essential void: 'The very subject ... has been elided' (p. 16). Put simply, there is an absence of the very figures the group have (at least in terms of the fictional scenario) ostensibly been gathered for. The royal couple, Philip IV and María Ana, appear only as a blurred presence [Figure 3] in the reflection within the mirror placed centrally on the shadowy rear wall, a reflection revealing what the figures in the foreground are looking at. As such, the mirror refers back to the device of Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, a work Velázquez would certainly have been familiar with, given that it then formed part of the Spanish royal collection. This again reveals two witnesses, framed by an open door [Figure 4].



FIGURE 3. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (detail), 1656.



FIGURE 4. Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Wedding* (detail), 1434.
National Gallery, London.

However, as Foucault notes, and unlike its precedent, the mirror ‘shows us nothing of what is represented in the picture itself’ (p. 7): it has a strange detachment, while nevertheless being central to the composition, and to the work’s meaning. It is, of course, ‘the reverse of the great canvas represented on the left’, displaying ‘in full face what the canvas, by its position, is hiding from us’ (p. 10).³ Placed symmetrically around the painting’s central axis, it is mirrored by that other rectangle of light within the gloom, the open doorway ‘which forms an opening, like the mirror itself, in the far wall of the room’ (p. 10). This introduces a further complexity, in that the doorway contains a visitor, silhouetted against the bright light, poised

³ John Searle this canvas to be none other than Velázquez’s *Las Meninas* rather than the fictive portrait of the royal couple (1980, p. 485). John Moffitt effectively dismisses this claim, on the grounds that the dimensions do not match (1983, pp. 286-287). More pertinently, given Moffitt’s meticulous reconstruction of the room, it would have been impossible to place a mirror within the room in such a way that the painter could have seen the scene reflected as it appears from the scene’s implicit point of view.

'like a pendulum' between coming and going, unregistered by any of the painting's protagonists (p. 11).

Foucault intriguingly suggests that the work presents surrogates, either side of the mirror, for further absences that he maintains are fundamental to the picture, that of the artist and spectator:

That space where the King and his wife hold sway belongs equally well to the artist and to the spectator: in the depths of the mirror there could also appear – there ought to appear – the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez. For the function of that reflection is to draw into the interior of the picture what is intimately foreign to it: the gaze which has organized it and the gaze for which it is displayed. But because they are present within the picture, to the right and left, the artist and visitor cannot be given a place in the mirror. (p. 15)

Iversen suggests that for Foucault 'these absences are a structural part of the classical episteme', in that 'the subject who classifies and orders representations cannot be amongst the represented things: man is not a possible object of knowledge. For Foucault, *Las Meninas* allegorizes this situation' (1993, p. 144). As such, Iversen suggests that:

Far from being a painting that acknowledges the spectator/artist's constitutive function, then, Foucault's *Las Meninas* actually short-circuits consideration of that position. It is painting's equivalent of Benveniste's historical utterance. Yet it must be significant that Foucault should have chosen this painting that poses so insistently the question of the viewing subject. (p. 144)

For Iversen, by painting himself into a composition that shows its subject only indirectly, Velázquez achieves a precarious 'sleight of hand', an allegorical equivalent of a 'classical episteme conjuring trick' (p. 145). As Foucault states, it is with the elided subject that 'representation, freed finally from the relation that was impeding it, can offer itself as representation in its pure form' (1974, p. 16).

Not unsympathetic to Foucault's argument, John Searle focuses his account of the painting in his essay '*Las Meninas* and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation' (1980) more narrowly on the status of the mirror

with respect to the displaced artist and spectator. Searle interprets these absences as an unsolvable paradox, in that 'the problem with *Las Meninas* is that it has all the eyemarks of classical illusionist painting but it cannot be made consistent with these axioms' (p. 483). Thus Searle maintains that the work is unprecedented in that 'we see the picture not from the point of view of the artist but from that of another spectator who also happens to be one of the subjects of the picture' (p. 483). Now it is clear that van Eyck's *Arnolfini Wedding*, in offering us the view of one or other of the painted witnesses to the marriage, also does just this. But, more importantly, is the claim that the painting presents a paradox well founded?

In an attempt to rule out just such a paradox, Snyder and Cohen, in their essay 'Reflexions on *Las Meninas*: Paradox Lost' (1980), point out a mistake common to both Foucault and Searle's accounts, in their assumption that the work's vanishing point corresponds to the mirror position. It is in fact located within the open doorway, therefore making it impossible for the mirror to reflect the royal couple from the work's implicit point of view (Snyder and Cohen 1980, pp. 434-436). Rather, the authors claim that 'the reflection must originate roughly from the central region of the canvas upon which Velázquez shows himself at work' (p. 441), the implication being that the mirror thus reflects a section of the royal double portrait [Figure 5].⁴ In arguing that the reflection is that of the unseen painting, Snyder (in a later paper) suggests that the mirror is in fact 'the mirror of majesty': an ideal or 'exemplary image of Philip IV and María Ana, an image whose counterpart *cannot* be seen in the persons of the king and queen' (1985, p. 559). Snyder claims this as a visual trope that would have been immediately recognized by Philip himself. While the work is undoubtedly a representation *about* representation, its central paradox is therefore lost. And if, as Alpers's claims in her account of the painting, 'ambiguity re-

⁴ The sizes of the reflected figures are in fact too large, given the dimensions of the room, to be a direct reflection of the living royal couple. With Snyder and Cohen's argument, the problem is somewhat alleviated as the viewing distance is reduced. George Kubler (1985) claims that the mirror is in fact 'a painted image of the King and Queen, painted on a small canvas as if seen in a mirror' (p. 316). This, however, would not explain its strange 'glow' relative to the other paintings on the rear wall. That Velázquez is not averse to manipulating a reflection is borne out by Velázquez's *Venus and Cupid*, the so-called '*Rokeby Venus*' – a painting that in order to engage the viewer manipulates the angle of the mirror and the size of the reflected image.

mains' (1983, p. 42, n. 10), then this misses the point in that 'ambiguity is not a condition of paradox' (Snyder 1985, p. 567, n. 11). Searle's paradox, as Snyder rightly notes, is not a mere oddity, but a 'logical closure', and hence 'self-referential' (p. 546). According to Searle, the artist and spectator *cannot* occupy the work's point of view because it is already occupied by Philip IV and María Ana: the painting presents the king and queen's particular perspective, not that of Velázquez or the viewer. By removing this supposed logical impossibility, Snyder and Cohen claim to remove the paradox.

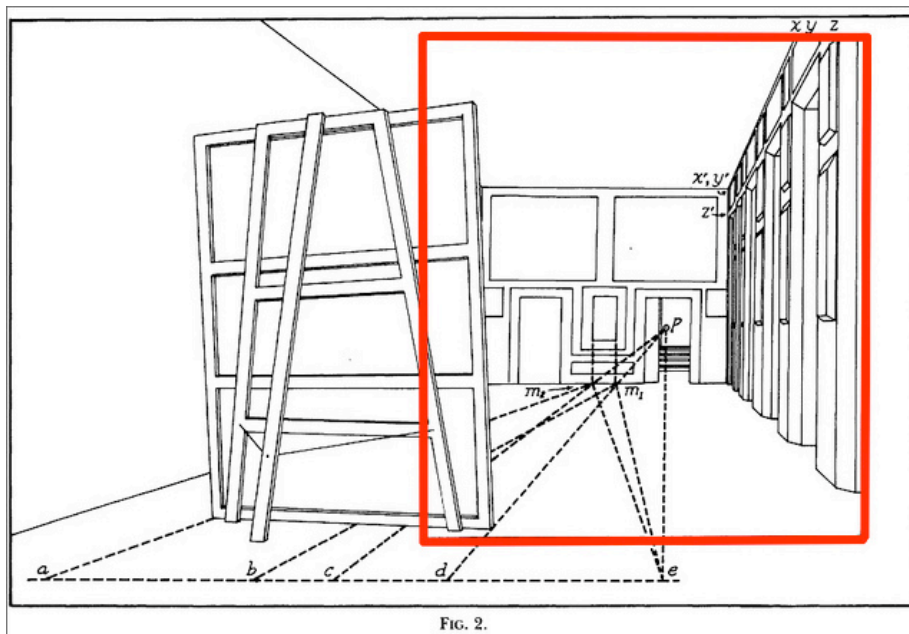


FIGURE 5. Joel Snyder, *Diagram of the Perspective Construction in Velázquez' Las Meninas'* (Snyder 1985, p. 549, fig. 2).

3.

Now, I want to argue that all three philosophical accounts discussed so far are flawed in their consideration of the 'prior' occupation of the scene's point of view. Foucault's own thesis, while suggesting that the 'outward'

gazes forces the spectator 'to enter the picture, assign him a place at once privileged and inescapable', also states that 'in the depths of the mirror there could also appear – there ought to appear – the anonymous face of the passer-by and that of Velázquez' (1974, p. 15). This conflates the virtual and real worlds of the painting and beholder. The logic of Searle's position (putting aside his perspectival error) accepts Foucault's notion of a prefigured internal presence, but then seems to go on to suggest that *all* implied spectators are thus, by definition, paradoxical. Yet the implied internal spectator, as Richard Wollheim has shown, occupies an unrepresented extension of the fictional world of the painting. By contrast, Velázquez (that is the painter of *Las Meninas*, not the depicted royal portraitist) stands (or rather stood) in his adopted studio; the spectator *of* the picture now stands within the gallery space of the Prado (though as we shall see, this was not always the case). Snyder and Cohen do not challenge the erroneous assumption underlying this confusion of internal and external spectators, but merely seek to rule out a non-existent paradox by challenging the correct placement of the work's vanishing point.

Given the above, one might expect the painting to be claimed as an exemplar for Wollheim's theory of the spectator *in* the picture. However, in an endnote to *Painting as an Art*, taking his cue from Velázquez scholar Jonathon Brown, Wollheim rules out 'Foucault's thesis that the royal pair constitute spectators in the picture' on grounds of prevailing decorum, deeming it unthinkable to imagine occupying the position of either Philip IV or María Ana (Wollheim 1987, p. 363). But this contradicts Brown's later insistence that this was, in fact, a private painting: as we shall see, a claim founded upon contemporary accounts that suggest that *Las Meninas* was originally painted to be hung in the 'executive office' of Philip IV (1986, pp. 259-260).

This has an immediate bearing on three questions Snyder raises somewhat sceptically in relation to Foucault and Searle's assumption that there is something unorthodox about the perspectival structure of *Las Meninas*: (i) 'Does [perspective] function in some way that it is essential to our understanding of the painting?'; (ii) 'Must an interpreter of the painting address the particular point of view that establishes it?'; (iii) 'More to the point, must an interpreter be concerned with the consequences of the work's perspective structure?' (Snyder 1985, p. 543). For Snyder, Fou-

cault and Searle's error in locating the vanishing point invalidates their arguments, and renders these questions largely superfluous to the work's meaning. And yet we can accept Snyder and Cohen's correction while maintaining an affirmative answer to all three questions. Indeed, indeed, I believe Velázquez is perfectly well aware of the significance of his own perspectival sleight of hand, as is acknowledged by Snyder and Cohen, who do not dispute the possibility that Velázquez might have indeed intended it to initially appear that the mirror reflected the king and queen directly. They also accept the proposition that the painting indicates '*the presence of the king and queen, in person, in the area just before the picture plane*' (1980, p. 443), arguing that the royal presence is still the most plausible explanation for the outward glances.

In fact, the importance of the perspective is arguably more of an issue in Snyder and Cohen's account than it is in Searle's and Foucault's. The relative freedom of position we have in front of a physical work, relative to the work's implicit point of view, might explain the deliberate confusion with the mirror; and Snyder here makes a perceptive point when he notes how Velázquez paints the reverse of the slanted canvas in a way that obscures the left wall: 'Had Velázquez provided even a small part of the wall on the left, it would have been immediately obvious that the viewpoint of the picture is well to the right of the mirror' (Snyder 1985, p. 553). The resulting discrepancy, while not constituting a paradox as such, is deliberately calculated. As Damisch notes:

In this sense [of Foucault's metaphorical use of perspective] Foucault is perfectly right to see the mirror as the painting's 'center,' though ... its *imaginary* center ... If there is any representation in painting, the configuration of *Las Meninas* reveals it to consist of a calculated discrepancy between a painting's geometric organization and its imaginary structure. It is this that Foucault's critics have failed to see, as a result of their having adhered to a strictly optical, conventional definition of the perspective paradigm. (1994, p. 438)

That ambiguity is built into the work's imaginary structure reminds us that the work is not a puzzle to be 'solved' through detective work, but to be experienced in its very ambiguities. In fact, as Leo Steinberg suggests, there are three centres, or *imaginary* centres, which keep shifting: the Infanta,

marking the midline of the painting, the vanishing point located in the far doorway, and the mirror, placed on the rooms central axis: 'the canvas as a physical object, the perspectival geometry, and the depicted chamber' (1981, p. 51).

4.

Before returning to this perspectival geometry, and to the painting's original location, I want now to make the claim that *Las Meninas* should be considered within the remit of group portraiture, and as such be recognised as a novel solution to an inherent problem of the group portrait. Portraiture, after all, not only won Velázquez's his position within the court, but constituted his primary responsibility as a painter in his final years. *Las Meninas* reflects upon (and raises the status of) the very nature of portraiture in all its guises: a *group portrait* configured on the pretext of a fictional staging of a royal *double portrait*, such that Velázquez's own *self-portrait* is conspicuously portrayed as part of the inner circle of the royal family. Moreover, *Las Meninas* might be seen to address a problem at the very heart of the engagement afforded group portraiture. Not its characteristic 'theatricality', a charge levelled against portraiture by Michael Fried (after Diderot),⁵ and defended by Riegl.⁶ Rather, the problem of unifying the group as a pictorial composition without introducing too strong a narrative element that would ultimately distract from its function as portrait, all the while operating within the strict conventions of portraiture that dictated figures must be facing forward, depicted at least in three-quarter profile. Here we need to return to Riegl's decisive distinction between inner and outer unity, internal and external coherence.

According to Riegl, paintings described as having a 'closed internal coherence' are founded on the reciprocity of pictorial elements contained *within* the picture, a self-sufficient reciprocity of interacting glances and gestures of figures engaged in a single action requiring no connection to the beholder (1999, 220-221). For Riegl, this kind of coherence, founded

⁵ See, for instance, Fried (1988).

⁶ See Olin (1989), where she recounts Riegl's attempts to defend 'the participation of the beholder in certain artistic practices against those who would dismiss it as "theatricality"' (p. 286).

upon subordination, is typical of late Italian Renaissance painting. While Italian works can accommodate single, or even double, portraits, the Italians faced a particular problem with the group portrait in that Riegl claims 'Italian artists felt compelled to create unity through a subordinate arrangement' (p. 80), one that tended to separate the autonomous work from the beholder in such a way as not to acknowledge his or her existence. Now while Riegl undoubtedly overplays national characteristics, Renaissance works do indeed tend to proceed from the kind of direct address of Masaccio's Mary in his *in-situ* fresco *Trinity* to the autonomous subordination of figures in a work such as Titian's *Pesaro Altarpiece*, where only a peripheral intermediary now intervenes on our behalf.

By contrast, works described as having an 'external coherence' are completed only by the presence of a spectator, and establish a rapport with the viewer based on 'attentiveness' – an ethical term that introduces a specifically psychological element into Riegl's analysis. Here subordination is replaced by coordination. The latter, however, can result in works where the gestures can look clumsy and forced, where the viewer must impose an external coherence; the result can feel like a cramped collection of individual portraits rather than a coherent or natural looking group located in free space.



FIGURE 6. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Nicolaes Tulp*, 1632. Mauritshuis, The Hague.

Rembrandt's novel approach to the group portrait, in his few attempts at the genre, was to attempt to found his external coherence on a fully resolved inner unity, dependent upon subordination. Nevertheless, this faced certain drawbacks. Despite the 'greater degree of individuality in their psychological connection (that is, attentiveness)', and the much greater sense of free space and unity, Riegl regards the animated physical gestures of Rembrandt's *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr Tulp* [Figure 6] as introducing too strong a sense of 'the psychological expressions of will and emotion' for the demands of a group portrait (p. 258). He is particularly thinking of the leaning forward of certain figures introducing a pathos that reveals an inner struggle. Rembrandt's *Night Watch*, where an unprecedented internal coherence is provided by the subordination of figures to the captain, can only (in Riegl's terms) be truly considered a double portrait in that 'the subordinating effect of the spoken work (in this case the command [to move forward]) operates directly on a psychological level only for one figure (the lieutenant); for all of the others, it takes the form of physical activity' (p. 267) – something fundamentally at odds with the group portrait [Figure 7].



FIGURE 7. Rembrandt van Rijn, *The Night Watch*, 1642.
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

However, with Rembrandt's *The Staalmeesters* (better known as *The Syndics*) (1661-62), like the *Night Watch* now in the Rijksmuseum, the solution to the problem of group portraiture has, for Riegl, been found, in that 'the figures charged with establishing internal coherence are the same ones responsible for external coherence, which is now perfectly specific in time and space' (p. 285). The painting depicts a single moment of time that is instigated by the implied viewer's arrival at the scene, now conceived as an 'interruption'. With *The Syndics*, Rembrandt extends what Riegl would describe as a commonality to include the viewer as an implied presence drawn into the inner logic of the work. It depicts a single moment of time that appears to be instigated by the viewer's physical arrival at the scene (the anticipated spectator's psychological repertoire is determined, at least in part, by the specificity of the original context - the Staalhof, where the Staalmeesters of the Clothmaker's Guild met). Indeed, that Riegl fails to explicitly distinguish between internal and external beholders is perhaps a feature of his exclusive focus on such commissioned group portraits, painted for specific sites and predicted audiences - where roles of internal and external spectators tend to merge.

Margaret Olin has argued that *The Syndics*:

[I]s a performance in which the beholder takes part. In Riegl's opinion the most fully resolved 'coordination' of internal and external coherence, the painting motivates the beholder's presence dramatically. One officer of the guild speaks to the others. They heed his words and try to gauge their effect on an unseen party, located in the same place as the beholder. Their attention to the speaker establishes internal coherence, and their attention to the beholder creates external coherence; i.e., it draws the viewer into a relationship. As the focus of so much concentrated attention, he is transfixed before the canvas, while their self-awareness keeps the relationship in balance. The beholder and the 'party' exchange places so often in the analysis that it is difficult to distinguish between them. (1989, p. 287)

5.

Las Meninas likewise has an institutionally anticipated audience, and utili-

ses a similar 'interruption'. The 'staging' of the royal double portrait not only provides the necessary internal coherence through subordination, but engages the implicit beholder in such a way that their presence – an interruption – is directly responsible for the pattern of responses within the scene. While consistent with Wollheim's arguments for a spectator *in* the picture, both works thus draw something of our sense of physical arrival into the imaginative encounter with the painting. As portraits, however, they perform fundamentally different functions: the communicative communality of one in sharp contrast to the private (though courtly) contemplation of the other.



FIGURE 8. John Moffitt, *Reconstruction of Velázquez's 'Las Meninas'*, (1983, p. 283, fig. 3; diagram and calculations by Terry L. Fox, BFA).

Here it is worth noting the institutional context where *Las Meninas* was painted and first hung. The room in which *Las Meninas* is staged, while destroyed by fire in 1734, can be identified with some certainty from ground plans and from contemporary accounts. John Moffitt's reconstructions of the ground plan in the Alcázar Palace (1983) reveal two significant facts [Figure 8]. Firstly, the overwhelming likelihood is that the royal couple stood (of course, in terms of the fiction) directly opposite the work's vanishing point, as both Foucault and Searle assume for mistaken reasons. Secondly, the viewpoint of *Las Meninas*, Velázquez's point of conception, lies *outside* of the main space, suggesting that the view was framed by an open doorway. The likelihood is that, fictionally, the king and queen stood at the threshold of, or somewhat behind this opening, a clue of which is offered in the reflected red curtain in the mirror (an echo of the curtain pulled back by the figure standing on the stairs). More importantly,

both Brown and Moffitt reveal that *Las Meninas* was originally painted to be hung in the executive office of the king (the *Pieza del Despacho de Verano*), a room in the *Torre Dorada* immediately above the room in which it was painted (Brown 1986, p. 259; Moffitt 1983, p. 286). This floor replicated the spatial arrangement of that below, so that standing looking at the painting in its original location, it would have been possible to then turn 180 degrees to look at almost the same spatial arrangement as depicted by the work itself [Figure 9]. As Brown suggests, 'despite its size, *Las Meninas* was regarded at the time of its creation as a private picture addressed to an audience of one, Philip IV' (p. 259). The *internal* spectator correlates with the principal audience.

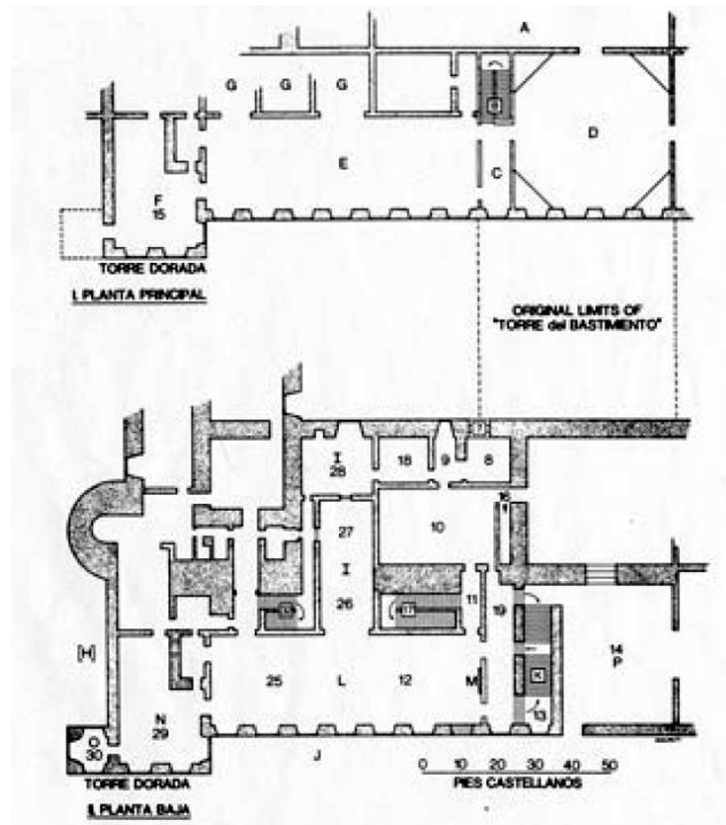


FIGURE 9. John Moffitt, *Reconstruction of the Ground Plan of the Alcázar Palace* (1983, p. 277, fig. 2; drawn by Maria Marchetti, BFA).⁷

⁷ The upper plan shows the first floor, with the *Pieza del Despacho de Verano* (F), where

If, as I suspect, the notion of interruption is key, then the proposition that these figures eagerly await an arrival in the guise of either the king or queen is made more feasible by the adjacent room theory, in that the royal couple can now appear from the beholder's side of the painting, framed by the doorway. This would be consistent with either of the competing interpretations of the maid Isobel's posture: as a 'curtsey' (Steinberg 1981, p. 53); or as a 'leaning over to reduce parallax', the better to see the arrival of the king and queen (Searle 1980, p. 484). It is also consistent with the fact that as yet not all the protagonists have noticed the royal presence. Moreover, Brown's claim that the anticipated audience was none other than the king himself avoids the not insubstantial issues of decorum. As Brown notes:

If this conclusion is correct, then it follows that the focal point of the picture was the king who 'interrupted' the figures in *Las Meninas* whenever he entered his summer office. The implicit assumption of his presence is recorded not only in the poses and expressions of the characters in the picture, but also in the mirror reflection. Some diagrams of the perspective locate the source of the reflection outside the picture while others identify it with the large canvas standing before the artist. This discrepancy can probably be attributed to the fact that Velázquez' instinctive use of perspective deliberately accommodates both possibilities. The purpose of the mirror is to insinuate the presence of the king (and queen) in the atelier. If the king were present in person before the picture, he could see, as it were, his own reflection in the mirror. If absent, the picture would be understood as a portrait of the infanta and her retinue, while the mirror-image would be attributed to the reflection from the easel ... In either case, the presence of the king proved once and for all that painting was the noblest of arts. (1986, pp. 259-260)

That the reflection is a section of the unseen canvas, however, means the work can potentially accommodate alternative implied beholders to identify with. This proposal is founded upon the premise, suggested but

the work was originally hung. The lower plan shows the ground floor, including the *Pieza Principal* (L), the room in which *Las Meninas* is staged, and the adjacent room in the *Torre Dorada* (N), where it was painted from.

not fully elucidated by Brown's account above, that there is no reason to assume that in the fictional scene presented by *Las Meninas* the royal couple need be present at the moment the painting depicts. However, it still seeks to explain the work as an interruption.

Whose view, if any, is thus presented? As Steinberg states, we certainly do not *feel* excluded; but are we still, as he suggests, 'part of the family, party to the event' (1981, p. 48)? Well, Steinberg's speculation as to whether we have 'just walked in to interrupt them' (p. 50) is alternatively explained if we identify ourselves *not* with the remote and distant royal couple, but with the palace steward who would surely have preceded them, in order to announce their imminent arrival. This possibility would directly 'mirror', along an axis from viewpoint to vanishing point, the presence and actions of the figure in the far doorway, who we know to be *another* Velázquez, don José Nieto, steward to the Queen. One of his roles was precisely to open the doors for the king and queen. Perhaps in this identification with a corresponding figure unambiguously *within* the work, we likewise pull back a curtain to announce Philip IV and María Ana's eagerly awaited arrival. This would provide an internal spectator entirely consistent with the fiction presented, meeting any objection about prevailing decorum. Paralleling the otherwise curious presence of the figure in the far doorway, it offers a considerably less onerous psychological repertoire for viewers *other* than the king to identify with.

But perhaps we can also identify with a spectator internal to the *other* painting: not the fictional painting of the royal portrait, which we see only in the mirror as the *reverse* (in two senses) of the depicted canvas, but to the group portrait that confronts us, posed and organized by Velázquez. If the painted 'visitor', located at the work's vanishing point, mirrors a steward arriving, he might also be said to mirror Velázquez himself. Not only do they share a name, but as Damisch notes this figure also seems to mimic the very posture of an artist (1994, p. 436). Intriguingly, each of Foucault's absences - king and queen, artist and spectator - would thus be provided a possible place, through spectatorships internal to the *two* respective works presented: that of the painting of the royal portrait and that of the staging of *Las Meninas* itself *as* group portrait. And here it is worth noting that, regardless of competing interpretations, these identifications are given added psychological charge by the viewer's own *physical* sense of arrival and

engagement in front of the work (the same device used by Rembrandt's *The Syndics*). As Steinberg suggests, it presents an encounter where we experience:

A kind of reciprocity, then: as if we on this side of the canvas and the nine characters in it were too closely engaged with each other to be segregated by the divide of the picture plane. Something we bring to the picture – the very effectiveness of our presence – ricochets from the picture, provokes an immediate response, a reflex of mutual fixation evident in the glances exchanged, the glances we receive and return. (1981, p. 50)

It is an encounter that has direct parallels to the masterpieces of Dutch group portraiture, as described by Riegl, where an external coherence is founded upon a fully resolved internal coherence, instantiated by an identification with an implied beholder that interrupts the scene.

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