

[The Forge of Vulcan](#) by [Diego Velazquez](#)

Original Lithographic Bookplate - Main Subject: Baroque



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About Diego Velazquez

Velázquez was born in Seville early in June 1599, the son of a lawyer of noble Portuguese descent. Velázquez was the son of Rodríguez de Silva, a lawyer in Seville, descended from a noble Portuguese family, and was baptized on the 6th of June 1599. Following a common Spanish usage, he is known by his mother's name Velázquez. There has been considerable diversity of opinion as to his full name, but he was known to his contemporaries as Diego de Silva Velázquez, and signed his name thus.

He was educated by his parents in the fear of God, and was intended for a learned profession, for which he received a good training in languages and philosophy. But the bent of the boy was towards art, and he was placed under the elder Herrera, a vigorous painter who disregarded the Italian influence of the early Seville school.

Velázquez fell in love with Pacheco's daughter Juana, whom he married in 1618 at Pacheco's hearty approval. The young painter set himself to begin recreating in his art the commonest things—earthenware jars of the country people, birds, fish, fruit and flowers of the marketplace. A notable piece from this early period of depicting common Spanish life is *Vieja friendo huevos* (1618, English: *An Old Woman Frying Eggs*), which also displayed his adherence to artistic tenets of the sixteenth century Spanish artist El Greco in its heavy contrast of light and dark colors.

By the early 1620s his position and reputation were assured in Seville; Velázquez's wife in these years bore him two daughters—his only known family. The younger died in infancy, while the elder, Francisca, in due time married Bautista del Mazo, a painter.

Velázquez produced other notable works in this time. Sacred subjects are depicted in *Adoración de los Reyes* (1619, English: *The Adoration of the Magi*), and *Jesús y los peregrinos de Emaús* (1626, English: *Christ and the Pilgrims of Emmaus*), both of which begin to express his more pointed and careful, if still slightly crude, realism.

Velázquez was now eager to see more of the world and went to Madrid in 1622, fortified with letters of introduction to the Count-Duke Juan Fonseca, who held a good position at court. He spent several months there, accompanied only by his servant. The impression which Velázquez made in the capital must have been very strong, because in the following year he was summoned to return by Count-Duke of Olivares, the all-powerful minister of Philip IV, and was offered 50 ducats (175g of gold—worth about €2000 in 2005) to defray his expenses. On this occasion he was accompanied by his father-in-law. In the following year, 1624, he received 300 ducats from the king to pay the cost of moving his family to Madrid, which became his home for the remainder of his life.

While a weak king, Philip was an art lover, and he was proud to be considered a poet and a painter. Historians note that one of the best features of his character was that he remained the faithful and attached friend of Velázquez for 36 years; Philip quickly recognized Velázquez's merit, declaring that no other painter should ever paint his portrait. Through an equestrian portrait of the king, painted in 1623, Velázquez secured admission to the royal service with a salary of 20 ducats per month, besides medical attendance, lodgings and payment for the pictures he might paint. The portrait was exhibited on the steps of San Felipe and was received with enthusiasm and vaunted by poets. It has unfortunately disappeared, having probably perished in one of the numerous fires which occurred in the royal palaces. The Museo del Prado, however, has two of Velázquez's portraits of the king (nos. 1070 and 1071) in which the harshness of the Seville period has disappeared and the tones are more delicate. The modeling is firm, recalling that of Antonio Mor, the Dutch portrait painter of Philip II, who exercised a considerable influence on the Spanish school. In the same year the Prince of Wales (afterwards Charles I) arrived at the court of Spain. Records indicate that he sat for Velázquez, but the picture has disappeared.

In 1628 Peter Paul Rubens visited Madrid on a diplomatic mission for nine months, and Velázquez was appointed by the king to be his guide among the artwork of Spain. Rubens was then at the height of his fame and had undertaken as a commission from Olivares (the large pictures which now adorn the great hall in Grosvenor House, London). These months might have been a new turning point in the career of a lesser known man than Velázquez at that time, for Rubens added to his brilliant style as a painter the manner of a courtier. Rubens had a high opinion of the talent of Velázquez, but he effected no change in the style of the strong Spaniard. He impressed him, however, with the desire to see Italy and the works of the great Italian painters.

In 1627 the king had given for competition among the painters of Spain the subject of the expulsion of the Moors. Velázquez won the contest; but his picture was destroyed in a fire at the palace in 1734. Recorded descriptions of it reveal that it depicted Philip III pointing with his baton to a crowd of men and women driven off under charge of soldiers, while Spain, a majestic female, sits looking calmly on. This triumph of Velázquez was rewarded by his being appointed gentleman usher. Later he also received a daily allowance of 12 reals, the same amount allotted to the court barbers, and 90 ducats a year for dress. Five years after he painted it, as an extra payment he received 100 ducats for the picture of Bacchus (*The Feast of Bacchus*), painted in 1629. The spirit and aim of this work are better understood from its Spanish name, *Los borrachos* or *Los bebedores* (the tipplers), who are paying mock homage to a half-naked ivy-crowned young man seated on a wine barrel. It is like a story by Cervantes, brimful of jovial humor. One can easily see in this picture of national manners how Velázquez had reaped the benefit of his close study of peasant life. The painting is firm and solid, and the light and shade are more deftly handled than in former works. Altogether, this production may be taken as the most advanced example of the first style of Velázquez.

In 1629 Philip gave Velázquez permission to carry out his desire of visiting Italy, without loss of salary, making him a present of 400 ducats to which Olivares added 200. He sailed from Barcelona in August in the company of the Marqués de Spinola, the conqueror of Breda, then on his way to take command of the Spanish troops at Milan. It was during this voyage that Velázquez must have heard the details of the surrender of Breda from the lips of the victor, and he must have sketched his fine head, known

to us also by the portrait by Van Dyck.

In Venice Velázquez made copies of Tintoretto's Crucifixion and Last Supper which he sent to the king, and in Rome he copied Michelangelo and Raphael, lodging in the Villa Medici till fever compelled him to retire into the city. Here he painted the *La fragua de Vulcano* (1630, *The Forge of Vulcan*; no. 1171 of the Museo del Prado), in which Apollo narrates to the astonished Vulcan, a village blacksmith, the news of the infidelity of Venus, while four others listen to the scandal. The mythological treatment is similar to that of the *The Feast of Bacchus*: it is intimately realistic and innately Spanish, giving a picture of the interior of a smithy of Andalusia, with Apollo inserted to make the story tell. The conception is commonplace, yet the impression it produces is from the vividness of the representation and the power of expression. The modeling of the half-naked figures is extremely detailed. Altogether, this picture is much superior to his other work painted at the same time, *La túnica de José* (1630, English: *Joseph's Bloody Coat*), which now hangs in the Escorial. Both of these works are evidently painted from the same models. Curiously absent from both of these works, however, is the influence of the Italians.

In Rome Velázquez also painted two beautiful landscapes of the gardens of the Villa Medici. Landscape was uncommon in Spanish art, but Velázquez showed how capable he was in this branch as well. The silvery views of Aranjuez, which at one time passed under his name, are now considered to be the work of his pupil and son-in-law Mazo. After a visit to Naples in 1631, where he worked with his countryman José Ribera and painted a charming portrait of the Infanta Maria, sister of Philip, Velázquez returned early in the year to Madrid.

Velázquez then painted the first of many portraits of the young prince and heir to the Spanish throne, Don Baltasar Carlos, looking dignified and lordly even in his childhood, in the dress of a field marshal on his prancing steed. The scene is in the riding school of the palace, the king and queen looking on from a balcony, while Olivares is in attendance as master of the horse to the prince. Don Baltasar died in 1646 at the age of seventeen, so, judging by his age in the portrait, it must have been painted in about 1641.

La rendición de Breda (1634, English: *The Surrender of Breda*) was inspired by Velázquez's first visit to Italy, in which he accompanied Ambrosio Spínola, who conquered the Dutch city of Breda a few years prior. The masterwork depicts a transfer of the key to the city from the Dutch to the Spanish army. This durable immortalization of Spain also shows the lasting influence of El Greco on Velázquez, as the two sides exist in a distinct separation, a characteristic tenet of the art of El Greco. The powerful minister Olivares was the early and constant patron of the painter. His impassive, saturnine face is familiar to us from the many portraits painted by Velázquez. Two are notable; one is a full-length, stately and dignified, in which he wears the green cross of Alcantara and holds a wand, the badge of his office as master of the horse, the other, a great equestrian portrait in which he is flatteringly represented as a field marshal during action. In these portraits Velázquez has well repaid the debt of gratitude which he owed to his first patron, whom Velázquez stood by during Olivares's fall from power, thus exposing himself to the great risk of the anger of the jealous Philip. The king, however, showed no sign of malice towards his favorite painter.

The sculptor Montafles modeled a statue of one of Velázquez's equestrian portraits of the king, painted in 1636, which was cast in bronze by the Florentine sculptor Tacca and which now stands in the Plaza del Oriente at Madrid. The original of this portrait no longer exists, but several others do. Velázquez, in this and in all his portraits of the king, depicts Philip wearing the golilla, a stiff linen collar projecting at right angles from the neck. It was invented by the king, who was so proud of it that he celebrated it by a festival followed by a procession to the church to thank God for the blessing. The golilla was thus the height of fashion and appears in most of the male portraits of the period.

Velázquez was in constant and close attendance on Philip, accompanying him in his journeys to Aragon in 1642 and 1644, and was doubtless present with him when he entered Lerida as a conqueror. It was then that he painted a great equestrian portrait in which the king is represented as a great commander leading his troops—a role which Philip never played except in pageantry. All is full of animation except the stolid face of the king. It hangs as a pendant to the great Olivares portrait—fit rivals of the neighboring Charles V by Titian, which inspired Velázquez to excel himself, and both remarkable for their silvery tone and their feeling of open air.

Besides the forty portraits of Philip by Velázquez, he painted portraits of other members of the royal family: Philip's first wife, Isabella of Bourbon, and her children, especially her eldest son, Don Baltasar Carlos, of whom there is a beautiful full-length in a private room at Buckingham Palace. Cavaliers, soldiers, churchmen and poets of the court, as, for example, the Quevedo at Apsley House, sat to the painter and, even if forgotten by history, will live on his canvas.

The Spaniards have always been cautious to commit to canvas the portraits of their beautiful women. Queens and infants may be

painted and exhibited, but ladies rarely. One wonders who the beautiful woman can be who adorns the Wallace collection, a brunette so unlike the usual fair-haired female sitters to Velázquez. This picture is one of the ornaments of the Wallace collection. But, if few ladies of the court of Philip have been depicted, Velázquez painted several of his buffoons and dwarfs. Even these deformed or half-witted creatures attract sympathy in the portraits by Velázquez, who treats them gently and kindly, as in *El Primo* (1644, English: *The Favorite*), whose intelligent face and huge folio with ink-bottle and pen by his side show him to be a wiser and better-educated man than many of the gallants of the court. *Pablo de Valladolid* (1635, English: *Paul of Valladolid*), a buffoon evidently acting a part, and *El Bobo de Coria* (1639, English: *The Buffoon of Coria*) belong to this middle period.

The greatest of the religious paintings by Velázquez also belongs to this middle period, the *Cristo Crucificado* (1632, English: *Christ on the Cross*). It is a work of tremendous originality, depicting Christ immediately after death. The Savior's head hangs on his breast and a mass of dark tangled hair conceals part of the face. The figure stands absolutely alone. The picture was lengthened to suit its place in an oratory, but this addition has since been removed.

Velázquez's son-in-law Mazo had succeeded him as usher in 1634, and Mazo himself had received a steady promotion in the royal household. Mazo received a pension of 500 ducats in 1640, increased to 700 in 1648, for portraits painted and to be painted, and was appointed inspector of works in the palace in 1647.

Accompanied by his faithful slave Pareja, whom he taught to be a good painter, Velázquez sailed from Malaga in 1649, landing at Genoa, and proceeded from Milan to Venice, buying paintings of Titian, Tintoretto and Veronese as he went. At Modena he was received with much favor by the duke, and here he painted the portrait of the duke at the Modena gallery and two portraits which now adorn the Dresden gallery, for these paintings came from the Modena sale of 1746.

Those works presage the advent of the painter's third and latest manner, a noble example of which is the great portrait of Pope Innocent X in the Doria Pamphilj Gallery in Rome, where Velázquez now proceeded. There he was received with marked favor by the Pope, who presented him with a medal and golden chain. Velázquez took a copy of the portrait—which Sir Joshua Reynolds thought was the finest picture in Rome—with him to Spain. Several copies of it exist in different galleries, some of them possibly studies for the original or replicas painted for Philip. Velázquez had in this work now reached the *manera abreviada*, a term coined by contemporary Spaniards for this bolder, sharper style. The portrait shows such ruthlessness in Innocent's expression that some in the Vatican feared that Velázquez would meet with the Pope's displeasure, but Innocent was well pleased with the work, hanging it in his official visitor's waiting room. Centuries later, the painter Francis Bacon would create an expressionist variation on Velázquez's portrait—one which Bacon was obsessed with according to his own admission—entitled *Figure with Meat* (1954), showing the Pope between two halves of a bisected cow.

In 1650 in Rome Velázquez also painted a portrait of his servant, Juan de Pareja, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. This portrait procured his election into the Academy of St. Luke. Purportedly Velázquez created this portrait as a "warm-up" of his skills before his portrait of the Pope. It captures in great detail Pareja's countenance and his somewhat worn and patched clothing with an impressive economy of brushwork; it is one of his best known pieces of portraiture.

King Philip wished that Velázquez return to Spain; accordingly, after a visit to Naples, where he saw his old friend José Ribera, he returned to Spain via Barcelona in 1651, taking with him many pictures and 300 pieces of statuary, which afterwards were arranged and cataloged for the king. Undraped sculpture was, however, abhorrent to the Spanish Church, and after Philip's death these works gradually disappeared. Isabella of Bourbon had died in 1644, and the king had married Marie-Anne of Austria, whom Velázquez now painted in many attitudes. He was specially chosen by the king to fill the high office of *apostador mayor*, which imposed on him the duty of looking after the quarters occupied by the court—a responsible function which was no sinecure and one which interfered with the exercise of his art. Yet far from indicating any decline, his works of this period are amongst the highest examples of his style.

One of the *infantas*, Margarita, the eldest daughter of the new Queen, is the subject of *Las Meninas* (1656, English: *The Maids of Honor*), Velázquez's magnum opus. Created four years before his death, it is a staple of the European baroque period of art. An apotheosis of the work has been effected since its creation; Luca Giordano, a contemporary Italian painter, referred to it as the "theology of painting," and the seventeenth century Englishman Thomas Lawrence cited it as the "philosophy of art," so decidedly capable of producing its desired effect. That effect has been variously interpreted; Brown points out the noteworthy interpretation that, in inserting within the work a diminutive, faded portrait of the king and queen hanging on the back wall, Velázquez has ingeniously prognosticated the fall of the Spanish empire that was to gain momentum following his death.

It is said the king painted the honorary Cruz Roja (Red Cross) of the Orden de Santiago (Order of Santiago) on the breast of the

painter as it appears today on the canvas. Velázquez did not, however, receive this honor of knighthood until three years after execution of this painting. Even the King of Spain could not make his favorite a belted knight without the consent of the commission established to inquire into the purity of his lineage. This aim of these inquiries would be to prevent the appointment to positions of anyone found to have even a taint of heresy in their lineage—that is, a trace of Jewish or Moorish blood or contamination by trade or commerce in either side of the family for many generations. The records of this commission have been found among the archives of the Order of Santiago. Velázquez was awarded the honor in 1659. His occupation as plebeian and tradesman was justified because, as painter to the king, he was evidently not involved in the practice of "selling" pictures.

Had it not been for this royal appointment, which enabled Velázquez to escape the censorship of the Inquisition, he would not have been able to release his *La Venus del espejo* (1651, English: *Venus at her Toilet*) also known as *The Rokeby Venus*. It is the only surviving female nude by Velázquez.

There were essentially only two patrons of art in Spain—the church and the art-loving king and court. Bartolome Esteban Murillo was the artist favored by the church, while Velázquez was patronized by the crown. One difference, however, deserves to be noted. Murillo, who toiled for a rich and powerful church, left scarcely sufficient means to pay for his burial, while Velázquez lived and died in the enjoyment of good salaries and pensions.

One of his final works was *Las hilanderas* (*The Spinners*), painted circa 1657, representing the interior of the royal tapestry works. It is full of light, air and movement, featuring vibrant colors and careful handling. Anton Raphael Mengs said this work seemed to have been painted not by the hand but by the pure force of will. It displays a concentration of all the art-knowledge Velázquez had gathered during his long artistic career of more than forty years. The scheme is simple—a confluence of varied and blended red, bluish-green, grey and black.

In 1660 a peace treaty between France and Spain was to be consummated by the marriage of Maria Theresa with Louis XIV, and the ceremony was to take place in the Island of Pheasants, a small swampy island in the Bidassoa. Velázquez was charged with the decoration of the Spanish pavilion and with the whole scenic display. Velázquez attracted much attention from the nobility of his bearing and the splendor of his costume. On June 26 he returned to Madrid, and on the July 31 he was stricken with fever. Feeling his end approaching, he signed his will, appointing as his sole executors his wife and his firm friend named Fuensalida, keeper of the royal records. He died on August 6, 1660. He was buried in the Fuensalida vault of the church of San Juan, and within eight days his wife Juana was buried beside him. Unfortunately this church was destroyed by the French in 1811, so his place of interment is now unknown. There was much difficulty in adjusting the tangled accounts outstanding between Velázquez and the treasury, and it was not until 1666, after the death of King Philip, that they were finally settled.

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