

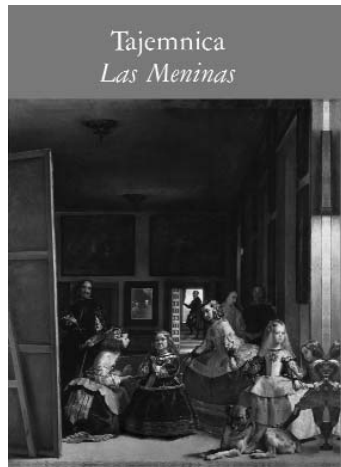
con el entorno urbano más próximo.

El libro es una herramienta útil para historiadores y un arma necesaria para urbanistas y arquitectos. Las ciudades no son sólo arquitecturas, calles, plazas, parques, topografía, paisaje... sino también sus habitantes. De entre todos sus habitantes –y aunque cada uno de ellos lleva grabada en la cabeza

su propia ciudad, o sus ciudades, lo que es importante tener en consideración como urbanista-, la visión de aquellos que como el profesor Reinoso se animan y arriesgan a reconstruirla históricamente a veces es determinante y puede marcar parte de su futuro. Eso esperamos. Pues habitando en Málaga, añoramos más cantidad de Málaga.

■ WITKO, Andrzej: *Tajemnica: A new anthology of writings on Diego Velázquez's Las Meninas (Tajemnica «Las Meninas». Antologia tekstów)*. Selected, edited and with an introduction by Andrzej Witko. Texts translated by: E. Damasiewicz, D. Kucala, J. Łukaszevska-Haberko, R. Samek, E. Świdzińska-Lay, A. Tatarkiewicz, M. A. Urbańska; Published by: "Wydawnictwo AA", Kraków 2006.

*Arthur Badach*



Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, painted in 1656, is not just one of the most famous European paintings dating from the Baroque period. Nor is it simply one of the best known Spanish works of art ever painted; one which encapsulates the artist's exceptional talent, the artistic tastes and customs of the times and also the atmosphere at the royal court of the Habsburgs, as if they had all been captured in the lens of a camera.

It also serves as a model for and

is, at the same time, also a challenge to young artists. Probably the most eloquent confirmation of the position this canvas holds in the history of art, is expressed in those works of art whose authors were deeply inspired by Velázquez, or who engaged in polemics with him, endeavouring to conjure up their own vision of what the Spanish master had depicted. These polemics have assumed varied forms in the three and a half centuries which have elapsed

since the painting was executed – from “doing battle with” the masterpiece and deconstructing it (e.g. Francis Bacon), to satirizing it (e.g. in the work of Antonio Mingote). Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí both painted a great number of their own versions of *Las Meninas*; these two artists probably felt obliged to search for the message conveyed by Velázquez’s painting since they were his compatriots and, therefore, in a way, his successors.

The works of art mentioned above, as well as the comments of critics and art historians were conceived with the idea of at least partially solving the puzzle and finding answers to the question which Velázquez left to future generations in his painting. And, it is a well-known fact that he left many such puzzles and questions to be answered.

The book entitled *Tajemnica Las Meninas* (The secret of *Las Meninas*), edited by Andrzej Witko is the fourth anthology to gather together texts devoted to this masterpiece, written by art historians, historians and philosophers, representing different academic circles in Europe, the United States and Canada. Previously, anthologies have been published in Spain (on the initiative of F. Mariás, in 1995), in Italy (A. Nova, 1997) and in Germany (T. Greub, 2001). Taking into consideration the fact that the first of these anthologies, i.e. the one by Mariás entitled *Otras Meninas*, was published only 12 years ago, it could be said that recently a lot of research has been carried out on Velázquez’s work, and at a truly staggering pace.

The anthology entitled *Tajemnica Las Meninas* contains 14 texts written over a period spanning from the first half

of the 18th century to contemporary times. The oldest is an interpretation by Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco, which was first published in 1724, and the most recent texts include an essay by Amy M. Schmitter dating from 1996, while the anthology closes with an essay by Andrzej Witko written in 2006. The introduction contains in-depth profiles and the academic achievements of all the authors. It should also be pointed out that all the texts, with the exception of Michel Foucault’s article, which was already known to Polish readers, have been translated into Polish for the first time (from Spanish, German, English and French).

The texts in the anthology are very interesting and enlightening. On reading the successive analyses of the painting, what is noticeable is that very few of them make no reference at all to earlier findings and observations. This is because, in their essays, nearly all the authors quote opinions and hypotheses people have expressed in the past about the painting in the Prado Museum and either attempt to support these theories with new evidence or to invalidate them.

The result is that the status of the research on *Las Meninas* is a continuous exchange of findings and reflections, however not only those of an academic nature. This is perhaps most evident in Carl Justi’s text; he reminds us about what others have said about the painting, including Waagen, Stirling-Maxwell, Mengs and, in particular, the principle French romantic, Théophile Gautier who, when standing in front of the painting, asked “Où est donc le tableau?” In turn, Palomino immortalizes Luca Giordano’s

famous words who, when asked by King Carlos II of Spain what he thought of Velázquez's work answered that is was in itself "the theology of painting". Another very interesting point about the painting's history and its reception is the fact that its current title, *Las Meninas*, was only suggested in 1843, i.e. nearly two centuries after it was painted.

There is no doubt that research on *Las Meninas* constitutes a trend of its own in modern art history. Indeed there are very few works of art which have had such a strong impact on the development of critical and academic research.

This state of affairs is dictated by the complexity of the issues the work poses and by the numerous hidden meanings contained in the painting. These are issues which researchers have been wrangling over for years. Let us recall a few of them. There is the eternal problem of defining the subject matter of the painting and, therefore, the type of picture it ranks amongst: is it a portrait of the Royal Family, or is it a work which tries to explain a defined moral attitude? Did Velázquez execute the painting only to immortalize the infanta and her court, or was it an attempt to draw attention to the artist's place in society and to express his own aspirations to becoming a nobleman? One of the questions asked by nearly all the authors is what is reflected in the mirror, and are the Royal couple actually present in the studio.

There is also the question of whom the picture was painted for – for everyone, or maybe only for the monarch himself (here one should be reminded that for many years

Velázquez's paintings were inaccessible to people outside the royal entourage); Amy M. Schmitter proposed an interesting theory on this subject.

Some of the researchers have described the interiors and décor of the no-longer existing chamber in the Alcazar Palace in Madrid in great detail. In order to give a very accurate description, Jonathan Brown even sought out information in 17th-century archives.

What the researchers find intriguing is the way in which Velázquez has reconstructed the "scene" in which he depicted his protagonists, and how far this arrangement of his characters is connected with the symbolism behind the work.

A few authors have attempted a laborious analysis of the perspective and optical interdependency in the painting. The almost mathematical methods used by Snyder and Searle evoke our admiration. Bernard Dorival is also interested in the compositional lines although the results of this research are needed for entirely different reasons. Dorival believes that the painting is an allegory of life and its intention is to direct our thoughts to the question of the passing away and futility of human life, although the basic starting point for academics, apart from an analysis of the structure of the composition (as already mentioned above), is also theological knowledge.

This example shows the rarity of *Las Meninas* as a work which not only encourages us to seek out answers to concrete and detailed questions, but also as an "area" where scientific methods specific to various – sometimes very different – areas of science meet and

sometimes even new ones are devised.

In the interpretations by Jan Ameling Emmens, Joel Snyder and Andrzej Witko, the key reference is to the old tradition of the so-called "Mirror of the Prince" – evoking an image of the monarchy as a set of virtues which should be imitated. The role of the mirror which is visible at the far end of the room in Velázquez's painting is not only there to reflect an image of King Philip IV and Queen Maria Anna of Austria, but is also an important element in the education of the infanta Margarita. In the broadest interpretation, by Emmens, the mirror directs our attention even further, to the next prop and persons who can be interpreted as completing the personification of the virtue Prudentia – which was the virtue most required of anyone who was to sit on the throne in the future. Victor I. Stoichita is of the opinion that the correct interpretation of the mirror which reflects the painting of the royal couple can help us understand two questions at once: the significance of the ruler's presence and the role of painting.

It does seem surprising that, although confronted with a portrayal which seems to be so strongly based on the concrete realities of the Court of Philip IV, only a few researchers have attempted more in-depth research into the history of Spain in the 17th century, and on social relations, court etiquette and the phenomena being introduced at that time in culture and art. Jonathan Brown's monograph distinguishes itself in this context; yet again he proves his vast knowledge about this subject (of particular interest are, e.g. his reminiscences, dating back to ancient times, of

the tradition of commemorating the monarch's visits to the artist's studio). The situation reigning in the court at Madrid was also the basis for an analysis conducted by Fernando Marías. De Tolnay's knowledge about the realities of artistic life in 17th-century Spain formed the basis for describing Velázquez's painting as an allegory of creation.

As to the issue of the relationship between the King and the artist – apart from Brown, there are also interesting comments on this subject in the texts by Stoichita, who refers back to the tradition of depicting the painter or sculptor *in abisso* – that is in a situation where there is a distance which cannot be overcome between him and the person he is portraying (e.g. St. Luke painting the Madonna, Phidias depicting the Greek gods).

Some of the authors concentrate largely on the various elements visible in the painting and try to interpret their significance. Others place much more emphasis on what is invisible, but the presence of which should be guessed at.

Ch. de Tolnay sees the painting in the Prado as being an allegory of art (he is one of the few who values the significance of the huge canvasses immortalized by Velázquez on the walls of the studio). Above all, he attempts an in depth study of the artist, to learn how he understands the act of creation and (eventually) to understand the personal message he directed at the spectator. Brown and Foucault also elaborate upon this theme.

From these essays it would transpire that the chief concern of many researchers in the past has been the message the work is trying to convey.

They are less interested in the artistic values of this beautiful and exquisitely painted canvas – which is something that is hard to understand. Charles de Tolnay appreciates the canvas's artistic values and there are beautiful descriptions in Carl Justi's text, as well as comments concerning the technical aspects, which are also overlooked by other authors.

Michel Foucault's text is particularly eloquent on the subject of the influence of the painting on the spectator. This famous 20th-century French philosopher, as if overawed by Velázquez's work, begins his analysis by stating obvious facts, meticulously describing all the things that were painted, as if he were afraid of overlooking anything.

And then there is Antonio Palomino's invaluable essay – it is the oldest text and is, therefore, not burdened by the status of research (in the current meaning of that definition); it is a records of what was known about the painting at the beginning of the 18th century. And this is what we have to be grateful to the author for since it is the first precise definition of the people visible in the painting and the functions they fulfilled.

Obviously this edition does not contain all the texts which have been written about Velázquez's masterpiece to date. As always on such occasions, one could ask for a justification for the inclusion of one work and not another.

When we pick up the book for the first time, our attention is immediately drawn by the photomontage on the cover (fig. 1): here Velázquez's painting is transformed according to a suggestion

made by Kenneth Clark (in his book *Looking at Pictures*). Clark's text is not included in the anthology. However, yet another artistic vision of *Las Meninas* worthy of discussion came into being.

Andrzej Witko had to make a selection, and such choice will always be subjective by nature. However, his choice is justifiable since it covers a wide range of the problems connected with the painting.

In his own article, Witko presents the views included in two important texts on *Las Meninas* which, for reasons beyond the control of the publishers, could not be included in the anthology: John F. Moffitt's *Velázquez in the Alcazar Palace in 1656: The Meaning of the Mise-en-scène of Las Meninas* (1983) and Manuela Mena Marqués's *El encaje de la manga de la enana Mari-Bárbola en Las Meninas de Velázquez* (1997).

We should include a few lines about the author of this selection: Andrzej Witko is a professor at the Papal Theological Academy in Kraków and a member of the Academic Council of the Art Institute of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw, and is the author of many publications about Spanish art. A publication devoted to art from the circles of the Order of the Holy Trinity (among others a monograph dating from 2002), images of Jesus of Nazareth, a summary of the iconography of Juan Bautista de la Concepción and San Miguel de Los Santos, texts about the works of El Greco, Velázquez, Juan Valdés de Leal and others, resulted in his being the only Polish art historian to become a member of the Royal

Academy of Fine Arts of San Telmo. Witko wrote about the painting in the Prado in an earlier article entitled *On the Content of Velázquez's "Las Meninas"* (in: *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki*, 2004).

Furthermore this *Anthology* has been meticulously prepared and has an attractive editorial layout; it contains many illustrations, the most valuable of which are the large close ups of details taken from the painting, thus allowing us to view more closely all aspects of this masterpiece. We can thus study it in even greater detail than we could by standing in front of the original in the Museo del Prado. These photographs enable us to examine certain fragments such as those in Carl Justi's text, where he writes about how many brushstrokes were used to paint Velázquez's hand. We can also personally search for other puzzles which might be contained in the painting, maybe even "immerse ourselves" in the painting and notice something which no one to date has yet done, which could lead to yet another interpretation of *Las Meninas*. In any case, there is a lot to suggest that this painting – its artistic worth, and in particular its subject matter and symbolism – will long continue to be the subject of discussions both by academics and art lovers. We can anticipate that new texts will be written which, we hope, would be as interesting and significant as this anthology dating from 2006.

Velázquez's painting gives the impression of being hermetic, even unfriendly towards viewers and researchers. After all, any humble

attempt not to disqualify elementary facts (Foucault, Searle), or to conduct an analysis of the research in art history and the history of customs (Brown, Emmens, Marias, Witko; is also an attitude dictated by humbleness – the humbleness required of the researcher), does not facilitate, so it would seem, research into the painting. Maybe, therefore, our search is not headed in the right direction? Maybe Joel Snyder, the author of a meticulous analysis of the painting's perspective is right when he says: "But this illusion is not in the painting; it is in us, and it is the illusion of understanding".

Maybe the painting's secret will never be solved? Again, Snyder says: "It is ironic that, with few exceptions, the now vast body of critical literature about Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* fails to link knowledge to understanding – fails to relate the knowledge we have acquired of its details to a convincing understanding of the painting as a whole". We also have the right to ask ourselves what is the point of each subsequent analysis of the work when we read Brown's statement (which appears at the very beginning of his essay!): "no single interpretation will ever satisfy every point of view". And it is for this very reason that interpretations are gathered together and anthologies published – irrespective of how subjective the selection could be deemed to be.

Portada: *Las Meninas* – Andrzej Witko's (after Kenneth Clark) vision of the painting.