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EIR Reviews

Velázquez, Hals bring great European art to America

by Nora Hamerman

Two peerless masters of Western painting, the Dutchman Frans Hals (1583-1666) and the Spaniard Diego de Silva y Velázquez (1599-1660), are being brought before the American public in major exhibitions that opened this autumn at Washington, D.C.'s National Gallery of Art and New York's Metropolitan Museum, respectively. The two shows reflect the generosity from our allies in Western Europe, who in some cases lent some of their most precious pictures (and tourist attractions) in what one might be tempted to suspect is a conscious effort to remind Americans of the roots of our notions of freedom and the dignity of the human individual, a theme to which political events of 1989 have given special immediacy.

The biggest lenders have been the Halsmuseum in Haarlem, The Netherlands, and the Prado in Madrid, Spain, but paintings have also come from museums behind the Iron Curtain in Prague, Leningrad, Schwerin, even Odessa, as well as private collections, to which only a very few people would otherwise have access.

Those who are determined or lucky enough to view one or both of the two exhibitions (Hals will be in Washington until Dec. 31, then the show travels to London and Haarlem; while Velázquez remains on display in New York, its only venue, until Jan. 8) should also plan the time to consult the third and youngest member of the great triad of 17th century portraitists, the incomparable Rembrandt. Between them, the permanent collections of the National Gallery and the Metropolitan boast 20 or so of Rembrandt's masterpieces.

A tumultuous era

Nearly contemporaries—although Hals could be considered a generation Velázquez's senior—the two artists are also joined by the fact that both are geniuses of the "painterly" approach to the creation of form that ultimately stems from the work of Leonardo da Vinci; both are masters of optical effects in an era of breakthroughs scientific optics and astronomy (e.g., Kepler); and both devoted themselves largely to portraiture, with relatively few pictures of explicit religious subject matter. Both, too, had the dubious fortune of being greatly admired by the 19th century Realists and Impressionists of France, who were attracted to the two artists' dazzling technique and "modern" subject matter, and who failed to recognize the presence in their works of the legacy of the Italian Renaissance which was their source, less obviously but just as surely for Hals as for Velázquez: that profound belief in the "divine spark" of creative potential in every human being.

Both, too, are "grandsons" of the Spanish Hapsburg Empire formed by the Emperor Charles V, in that tumultuous era when the northern Netherlands revolted and formed the first Dutch Republic, and Spain faced a shrinking empire and dwindling power. It is the period rather stuffily referred to by historians as Early Modern Europe, the birth pangs of the nation-state, and with it of a concept of the individual in which we recognize our own visage more directly than perhaps in any prior epoch. This was the epoch that drew the passionate attention of Friedrich Schiller, as historian and dramatist, in such plays as *Don Carlos, Fiesko, Maria Stuart,* and his historical essay on *The Revolt of The Netherlands*. We witness the Spanish influence on the Netherlands in the black costumes of Hals's early sitters especially, and in Velázquez, although the picture is not in this show, the presence of the Hapsburgs' erstwhile Dutch subjects is vividly portrayed in the *Surrender of Breda,* which records a moment in the Thirty Years War when things were going Spain's way.

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Velázquez: The Infanta Margarita, oil on canvas, 128x100 cm., Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna.

Frans Hals: Catharina Hooft and Her Nurse, oil on canvas, 86x65 cm., Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz, West Berlin.

Typical of the era, which saw vast flows of population in the upheaval that led to the eruption of the Thirty Years War in 1618, both artists are immigrants. Frans Hals was born in 1583 in Spanish-ruled Antwerp, and emigrated as a lad with his family to Haarlem in the independent Netherlands—a Haarlem which the influx of refugees from the Catholic South was rapidly changing from being a town of breweries into a much more important and diversified trading and manufacturing center. Diego Velázquez, of Portuguese (perhaps Jewish Portuguese) descent on his mother's side, was born in the bustling manufacturing and commercial center of Seville in 1599, and then as a young man, under the patronage of the royal favorite, the Count-Duke of Olivares (see page 60), he entered the court of Madrid and soon became the Painter to the King. Around 1630 and also in the 1650s, he made lengthy, crucial visits to Italy, which was still the capital of European painting, and under the much-underestimated Barberini Pope Urban VIII, a potent shaper of political events and culture in the era of emerging nations.

Of course, the differences between the two painters are also very great, just as one would expect: We are beholding two different distillations, in two different languages, of a common heritage of the Italian Renaissance far from its peninsular birthplace. Velázquez—believed by many, including this writer, to be perhaps the greatest painter yet—is practically an Italian who happened to live in Madrid, so deeply did he drink of the fountain of Italian art and its Greco-Roman antecedents. Frans Hals never traveled to Italy, but the discovery of his rare religious works, the two Evangelists now in the museum of Odessa (U.S.S.R.) which is one of the surprises of the Washington show, proves how he drew the lessons of Italian art through the Dutch "Caravaggists," specifically a school of painters from Utrecht who spent years in Rome just after 1600 and brought back with them the combination of a revival of Renaissance forms and the emotional directness required by Counter-Reformation norms.

Some comparisons

Let us imagine for a moment that we are able to put the two artists side-by-side, something which will never occur in the real world and did not occur in the 17th century. Yet I believe the idea of such a juxtaposition might have appealed to the poetic imagination of Schiller, who confronted the destinies of Spain and the Low Countries in his great drama *Don Carlos*.

Portraits of children. One of Hals's best early paintings, now in Berlin, depicts the two-year-old Catharina Hooft with her nurse. Catharina belonged to a prominent Amsterdam bourgeois family and eventually married a man who became the burgomaster of Amsterdam and adviser to Holland's leading statesman. Although this politically important future could not be known at the time of the portrait, the beautiful

child radiates confidence and happiness. She forms an interesting contrast to Velázquez's painting of about 30 years later, the 1653 portrait of the two-year-old Spanish Infanta Margarita, who likewise has a charming innocence but is surrounded by the conventions of majesty, befitting the myth of the divine right of the Hapsburgs to rule.

Genre paintings. A striking novelty of the early 17th century is the emergence of "genre" paintings which directly depict, without an obvious allegorical content, people and events of everyday life. Velázquez and Hals share this subject matter, although their approach to it could hardly be more different. Hals's "Rommel-Pot Player" of c. 1615 (whose quality was unexpectedly revealed in the cleaning of the picture for this exhibit) shows a street person of the era, who played on a toy instrument that delighted children by squealing like a pig. What strikes us is the vitality of the figures, especially the children. Velázquez's "The Waterseller of Seville," painted before 1623 when he left for Madrid, shows even in a youthful work his superior command of composition, and he endows the humble street figures with such gravity that we almost suspect a hidden religious meaning in the work.

Saints. The two shows happen to include a kind of work that was rare indeed in both painters—religious paintings. Hals's "St. Matthew" with an angel (Odessa Museum) shows his debt to the so-called Caravaggist movement of the early 17th century, named for the Italian maverick painter Caravaggio but far broader in its real dimensions, in which the saint is shown as a humble peasant struggling to grasp and set down the divine gospel. Likewise, Velázquez's "Epiphany" presents a St. Joseph lifted directly from his portrayals of peasants around Seville, and can well be imagined to come out of the pages of Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, published during the artist's youth. The movement from which both Hals and Velázquez drew their inspiration here was grounded on a sharp rejection of Mannerism, the anti-Renaissance artistic style imposed by the resurgent oligarchy after the Sack of Rome in 1527, and a return to Renaissance values from a new standpoint that was later to inspire Rembrandt.

The Powerful. The contrast between two societies, as well as the follies of both, leaps out in the comparison between the Count-Duke of Olivares on Horseback (1635-40) by Velázquez, one of the prizes from the Prado at the New York show, and the lifesize portrait, completed in 1637, of an Amsterdam militia company, dubbed "The Meager Company," in the Hals show. While the Count-Duke is a flawed figure of world-historical importance, the militiamen of the Dutch Republic took no less pride in their membership in the "civic guards," societies that originated in the independence struggle and continued into the 17th century with a more social than military value. The present exhibition marks the first time that one of these grand-scale militia group portraits has been exhibited in the United States.

The Powerless. Hals's celebrated "Malle Babbe," the Witch of Haarlem, was an actual individual who is recorded as having been committed to the local asylum on various occasions. It is a measure of the artist's genius that he portrays her with a depth of relief, deriving from his handling of light, that implies the existence of a soul, of a mind that has been lost. Likewise, Velázquez painted many dwarfs and "fools," who were adopted for entertainment at the Spanish court. Some clearly possess only physical deformities, while for others, like the magnificently painted "Buffon Called Don Juan of Austria," their demented fantasies seem to take on a dimension of historic irony, as the fool's delusions of grandeur are echoed in the sea battle painted in the background.

Dialogue

Through such "pictures within the picture," Velázquez, in a way that surpasses Hals and indeed almost every artist, is able to create a dialogue within the painting itself, a kind of soliloquy equal to those of Shakespeare and paralleled later by the figures of Rembrandt.

The subject of all great art is dialogue, because without it, one cannot convey the notion of lawful change, of the process of succession to a higher level of ordering of thought and of dominion over the physical universe, which is identical with the process of scientific discovery, and which requires an internal self-development in the mind.

Hals creates the dialogue mainly between the sitter and you the viewer, or between two sitters, as in his inventive pairs of portraits of wedded couples. This capacity reaches a high point in a group portrait like the "Governors of St. Elizabeth's Hospital," a painting that anticipates the genius of Rembrandt's "Syndics of the Cloth Guild" by a full three decades.

The portrayal of the *inner* dialogue, between contrasting inner "voices"—the voice of greed and passion; the voice of practical reason; finally, the voice of the higher, creative reason which is identical with love—this is the theme of the greatest art. We find it rather rarely in Hals; but perhaps because he was a player on the stage of one of history's great tragedies, the lost potential of Spain, we continually encounter it in the masterpieces of Velázquez.

The two artists seem to come most closely together when they portray their fellow artists. Velázquez painted his mestizo slave, whom he freed and who became a considerable painter in his own right, Juan de Pareja, in Rome in 1661; the painting, now part of the Met's permanent collection, holds a proud place in the current exhibit. From the same era come Hals's painting of the artist Vincent Laurensz van de Vinne (Toronto) which was long mistaken for a Velázquez, and his portrait of Frans Post, the first European-trained artist to paint landscapes of the new world (of Brazil, in 1637-44). When we compare them, while the directness is very similar, we see that Velázquez has endowed Juan de Pareja with a special illumination one can haltingly describe as "divine."

This voice of universal necessity is the further required

Velázquez: The Count-Duke of Olivares on Horseback, oil on canvas, 313x239 cm., Prado Museum, Madrid (above).

Frans Hals: Captain Reynier Reael, detail, The Amsterdam Crossbow Civic Guard, oil on canvas, 207x428 cm., City of Amsterdam, on loan to Rijksmuseum (right).

member of the dialogue—particularly the inner one—and while both Hals and Velázquez struggled to convey it largely outside the framework of official religion, Velázquez succeeded better than his Dutch counterpart, better than anyone ever did in painting, except, of course, Rembrandt.

These three artists did not know each other. Even though Haarlem is but 12 miles from Amsterdam, it is dubious that Rembrandt or Hals ever visited each others' studios. Their affinities do not stem from acquaintance, much less from a *Zeitgeist,* but rather from a common commitment to an ideal of individual freedom in an era of profound political and social upheaval, a commitment firmly rooted in the visual culture of the Italian Renaissance.

The Metropolitan Museum at 82nd Street and Fifth Avenue in New York is open 9:30 to 5:15 Sunday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday; 9:30-8:45 p.m. Friday and Saturday; an admission fee is required. It will be closed Mondays, and Christmas and New Year's. The National Gallery of Art at Constitution Avenue and 6th Street in Washington, is open free of charge Monday-Saturday 10-5, Sundays 12-9, and will be closed on Christmas. Both exhibitions are accompanied by scholarly catalogues which, apart from being beautifully illustrated, go beyond the scope of the shows and are well worth their price.