English 1101 **A**

126 January 2007

The Game of Mirrors

As the cool, stale air fills the sixteenth century royal living room, four teenaged maids tend to the very young princess of Spain. This pale, blonde child appears to be Margarita Teresa, the daughter of King Philip IV. Her wide dress is adorned with several layers of expensive ivory-colored fabric, and her light locks of hair are pinned to the side. She extends her right hand to a kneeling maid, who almost seems to be asking the young girl a question. Behind this maid, a large canvas is placed, but only the back of it can be seen. Working on this canvas, a painter almost dips his brush into his palette for color, while at the same time, he gazes toward some object in front, yet outside, of this painting. To the left of the centered princess stand three other ladies in waiting, all of whom tend to simply fill up space in the grand room. In front of these three lay the King's German-shepherd. Behind the ladies, two adults, one male and one female, talk to each other, most likely about the King of Spain and his wife. In the back of the painting, a door opens to a man on the third step in a set of marble stairs, watching the girls and the painter. At least three other paintings fill the wall in the back of the room, but one particular image stands out the most. Eerily, in a frame much lighter than the other paintings, a man and a woman can be seen looking toward the front of the painting. While most people will agree that these two are King Philip IV of Spain, and his wife Mariana of Austria, some people cannot decide whether the image in the frame belongs to a window, a painting, or a mirror. Any of those ideas could be true in the painting; however, only one has logical, supportive evidence. In the painting, "Las

Meninas", Diego Velasquez utilizes the concept of a mirror to display the King and his wife, because he incorporates himself as the painter, uses brighter colors for the image, and accurately places the two just outside of the whole painting (Irving 38).

If an artist places himself at work in a painting, and his picture is unknown to the audience, he must be painting an object the audience does not directly see. Toward the left side of "Las Meninas", a very large canvas stands, almost reaching the ceiling. In front of it a middle-aged, male painter begins to create a masterpiece. Brown, wavy hair extends downward from his shiny forehead. His matching mustache points up at his piercing brown eyes that stare directly at the audience. His clothes appear knight-like, including a large, red cross in the middle of a black tunic. Scholars, such as Richard Cork, agree the painter is in fact Velasquez himself (1). They also believe he can be painting one of two things: he either paints the young princess, or the royal couple. Clearly, the young girl actually exists in the whole painting, but in order to paint the couple, or for the audience to understand who the child is, Velasquez must display the King and his wife somewhere else in the painting. It is obvious the young child and the painter gaze toward the same object, the royal couple, and in order to illustrate this, Velasquez reflects their image in a mirror in the back of the room.

Strikingly, the image of King Philip IV and Mariana appears much brighter than anything else in the painting, except for the bright, blonde hair of their young daughter. In the back of the painting, several other large works of art sit on the wall, but most audiences cannot tell exactly what those paintings display, as the light on them is too dim. The light focused on the image of the royal couple seems quite bright, and that part of the whole painting almost looks gleaming. If indeed the image is simply a painting of

the King and his wife, then Velasquez probably would not have made it as intense as it appears. Also, most paintings of royalty are not as small as this image in the back of Velasquez's work. Most portraits of kings and queens would be at least five times larger to about the size of the mysterious canvas in the front of the whole painting.

While many people may ask, "why is nothing else reflected in the supposed mirror, except for the King and his wife?", they may fail to realize the height of the mirror compared to the rest of the room. The young girl stands no more than three feet tall, and the maid to her right kneels to the daughter's level. No one else in the painting seems to be in the way of the reflection, as they all stand to the sides. The image rests at least four feet above the ground, which should easily clear the top of any of the ladies' heads. Also, the painting ends right before one can see the bottom of the front of the young girl's exquisite dress, leaving just enough room for a few people to be standing very close to the scene. Physically, Velasquez allows just enough room for the King and his wife to be standing in such a position that nothing else is reflected in the mirror on the wall.

Diego Velasquez has clearly used the trick of a mirror in "Las Meninas" to illustrate the location of King Philip IV and his wife, Mariana, by placing himself in the picture, enhancing the image of the couple, and following logical, positioning rules. By placing himself in the picture, as an artist, it obviously demonstrates he is painting, as well as looking at, something very important. If the image was just another painting, it probably would appear just as dark, and just as big, as any of the other paintings. Also, as a whole, this painting is set up perfectly so that an image, and only that image, is reflected in the mirror. Evidently, this could be a "two-way" painting.

Works Cited

Cork, Richard. “Las Meninas”. New Statesman. 135.4184 Oct. 2006: 38+. Expanded Academic Index. InfoTrac. U of Florida Lib., Gainesville, FL, 14 Jan. 2007. <http://infotrac.galegroup.com>

Irving, Mark. “Painting Power”. New Statesman. 135.4184 Oct. 2006: 40. Academic Search Premier. WilsonWeb. U of Florida Lib., Gainesville,FL. 14 Jan. 2007. <http://content.epnet.com>