

Politics, Painting and Presentation: Velázquez's Equestrian Portraits for the Hall of Realms

Kristina M. Gray: McNair Scholar

Dr. Janice Neri: Mentor

History of Art and Visual Culture



Introduction

During the years that Diego Velázquez occupied the post as pintor principal (court painter) to King Philip IV of Spain, the images he created of his sovereign were exhibited so that members at court as well as visiting sovereigns and dignitaries could view these representations of strength as a reflection of the Spanish kingdom. The clarity of the presentation of power of King Philip IV and his family was vital in continuing with the tradition of demonstrating the royal family's strength as rulers through the medium of art. Similarly, the duty of the Count Duke Olivares as favorite to the king made him equally responsible in ensuring that Philip and the Spanish monarchy remained in a flattering light.

In the fifteenth century, during the reign of the Catholic monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, Spain saw great success with the discovery of the Americas. The newfound land and labor Spain had acquired made the country a power to be reckoned with in Europe. During the reign of the Catholic monarchs, Spain became well accustomed to receiving large shipments of silver and other goods from the Americas which formed the foundation of much of the country's prosperity. Isabella and Ferdinand built the infrastructure for Spain to continue its success and for future monarchs to take on the reign of the country with ease. This was certainly not the case when Philip IV ascended to the Spanish throne in 1621. Although still a notable European power, the Spanish empire was undergoing somewhat of a disconnect from the prestige it had experienced in its former years. Perhaps the most significant reason for this decline was the number of silver shipments the country received previously now arrived in smaller amounts and with less frequency.¹ Philip IV was used to excessive spending, but his means were less than what the monarchs, such as Isabella and Ferdinand, before him had. As monarch, Philip was not only spending more than the country was in the habit of receiving, but he was also continuing to fund perpetual wars, military campaigns, and fulfill his penchant for the finer things in life.

In 1621, Philip IV came to power after the death of his father Philip III. In the early days of his reign he sought to remove his father's old advisors and seek out new men to fill their posts. The Count of Olivares fell into favor with Philip IV while Philip was still heir to the throne. Perhaps, for this reason it was an easy choice for Philip to appoint Olivares as prime minister to replace Don Baltasar de Zuñiga after Zuñiga's untimely death. The fact that Olivares had a connection to Zuñiga, who was his uncle, may have also played into the decision-making process.² Velázquez came to court shortly after Olivares' appointment and it is suspected that with his help, he succeeded in captivating the king's eye with his painting.³ The Spain in which these three men lived was low in terms of government and economic stability. However, in terms of art, this time period thrived and now Philip IV's reign is reflected upon by art historians as "The Spanish Golden Age."⁴

¹ Elliott, J. H. 1986. *The Count-Duke of Olivares: the statesman in an age of decline*. New Haven: Yale University Press. pg. 410

² Elliott, John H. "Appearance and Reality in the Spain of Velázquez." *Velázquez*. London: National Gallery Limited, 2006. pg. 14

³ See source 2 pg. 15-16

⁴ For further discussion about the Spanish Golden Age see Brown, Jonathan. 1998. *Painting in Spain: 1500-1700*. New Haven: Yale University Press. pg.111

Olivares as Prime Minister

As Prime Minister, Olivares assumed the responsibility of carrying out major decisions such as creating laws, initiating military campaigns and allocating the country's funds. The majority of the aforementioned duties were fronted by the king and then effectuated by Olivares. Olivares took charge of these 'kingly' duties largely due to Philip's preference to hunt rather than perform his responsibilities at court.⁵ Many accounts of Olivares' time as prime minister allude to a career filled with few triumphs and many failures. Upon his appointment as prime minister, Olivares made it clear that he intended to re-establish the prestige that Spain had experienced in the past.⁶ This, however, was not the case as time moved on and Olivares had yet to encounter the success he had hoped for. One noted failure from the early years of his program for change was his attempt to turn the Spanish people from an agricultural class to that of a merchant class.⁷ Olivares observed how the Dutch were successful with their new merchant class and sought to implement such changes for the people of Spain. Although Olivares was well intentioned such a drastic change for the Spanish people was one they did not take well. At this same moment, Olivares' longtime aspirations for peace with the Dutch were proving to be an unfruitful endeavor.⁸

Olivares' role as royal favorite carried much responsibility, prominence and criticism. Historian John H. Elliott writes that "[Olivares] had to operate in a political climate which was increasingly hostile to the existence of a royal favourite, and yet had to win and keep the royal favour." Olivares needed to be cautious about his every move at court because his many attempts to repair Spain to the stability of its past were falling through. However, even with little positive change during the next few years, Olivares still remained in the strong favor of the king. The favor and the influence that Olivares was able to maintain with Philip can be demonstrated in the decision to build Buen Retiro.

Shortly after the summer of 1629, Philip found himself exhausted by the duties that plagued him in Madrid. Although military defeats and reform failures were not a rare occurrence during his reign, that summer proved to be particularly challenging for the king. The Count-Duke encouraged Philip to build royal apartments outside of Madrid to free the king from the many obligations that came with his presence in the city. Only a few months later, ground was broken on the new construction and what had started as a modest proposal soon turned into a grand palace, the Spanish royal residence later named Buen Retiro.⁹

Buen Retiro and the Representation of Power throughout Europe

Buen Retiro was built to serve as a retreat for Philip, a palace to celebrate the arts that he enjoyed so much. However, the grandeur of the palace was not reflective of the rest of Spain. The palace's construction began in 1630, at a time when Spain was plunged into an economic depression. The country was receiving less silver from the Americas and was also tied up in various military campaigns in addition to undergoing an agricultural crisis.¹⁰ The erection of a grand palace was not executed at an opportune moment considering the poor circumstances the rest of Spain was experiencing. Even so, this did not alter the extravagance of the palace.

At the time Buen Retiro was built, palaces were expected to visually present a family's power and lineage either on the façade, in the interior, or both. Artwork presented in the manner of the Hall of Realms, also referred to as the Hall of Princely Virtues, followed the conventions of allegorical portraiture set forth by the Italians. One of the earliest examples of a hall gilded with these ideals can be seen during the High Renaissance with Raphael's decoration of the papal apartments in the Vatican.¹¹ This grand hall contained art depicting allegories, personifications, and pictorial proof of the strength in the pope's family line. Another example of strength in the family line depicted in representational form could be found at the Duke of Ceri's Palace in Rome. On the façade of his palace he placed, in false niches, the portraits of four Habsburg emperors (Charles V, Maximilian I, Robert, and

⁵ See source 1 pg. 102-115

⁶ Elliott, J.H. *Spain and its World 1500-1700*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1992. pg.164

⁷ See source 6 pg. 123-124

⁸ See source 6 pg. 128

⁹ See source 1 pg. 409

¹⁰ See source 1 pg. 411

¹¹ Riess, Jonathan B. 1984. "RAPHAEL'S STANZE AND PINTURICCHIO'S BORGIA APARTMENTS". *Notes in the History of Art*. 3 (4): 57-67.

Matthew) and placed near the four emperors were paintings of their military victories.¹² The Duke of Ceri's palace façade served as a form of allegiance to the powerful Spanish crown through the representation of the Habsburgs and their victories. However, in the Spanish palace of Buen Retiro the idea of allegiance was not as necessary as was the presentation of power.

It was fitting that Buen Retiro would house its own grand room to fit the criteria of presenting the strength of the Habsburgs and of Spain through portraiture. The Hall of Realms functioned as the throne room for Buen Retiro. The Hall of Realms was the area in the palace reserved for the king and his family to view entertainment and hold official ceremonies.¹³ Because of the function of the room many powerful and influential people would get to see the interior. Consequently, in hopes of conveying the stability of the monarchy and the realms it governed, those in power used the art within this room to their advantage. The Hall of Realms was decorated from 1634 well into the early months of 1635. Jonathan Brown and J.H. Elliott, the two leading scholars on the Buen Retiro palace and the Hall of Realms, agree that Olivares was integral in putting the "program" for the Hall of Realms together.¹⁴ This program included ten herculean narrative paintings, twelve historical paintings, and five equestrian portraits, all of which were created and placed in the Hall in a manner that was intended to amplify the prestige of the crown.

Velázquez was charged with painting the equestrian portraits, which were placed on the east and west walls of the Hall of Realms, and in between them was a large rectangular hall that spanned 34.6 meters long by 10 meters wide. The north and south walls held the ten narrative paintings that showed ten labors of Hercules (completed by another Spanish painter, Zurbarán). The individual paintings in this narrative series were placed above the ten windows in the hall. Placed in between the narrative paintings hung twelve large historical paintings depicting Spanish military victories.¹⁵ Six different artists, including Zurbarán and Velázquez, completed these historical paintings.

Each of the paintings within the room adhered to the tradition of incorporating personifications, allegory, and familial strength into the artwork found in grand palaces. The Spanish Habsburgs, Philip's family, claimed to be descendants of the powerful Hercules. The herculean narrative paintings were created and placed within the room to show the Habsburgs and Hercules as relatives. As for the historical paintings, they emphasized military victories that occurred under Philip's reign and demonstrated the country's strength. The herculean narrative series and the historical paintings, although representative of the Spanish monarchy's strength and lineage, never show the monarchs. It is only in the equestrian portraits where the kings of Spain and their consorts were shown. The portraits were placed alongside the many images of glory and greatness that were depicted in the historical paintings and the herculean narrative series. The historical paintings tie together Spain as victorious and prosperous while the herculean narrative paintings give legitimization to the Habsburg's right to rule.¹⁶ The Hall of Realms is a standout from the Roman depictions of power in that it tries to encompass all elements that would legitimize Philip IV's rule. Drenched in iconography, drama, and entirely made by the hands of Spain's most skilled painters, this room served as a testament to not only the power of Spain's ruling family, but to the Spanish empire.

The Equestrian Portraits

Velázquez's equestrian portraits showcase the constancy of the Habsburg's succession line accordingly, representing the Spain's past rulers, Philip III and Margaret, Spain's present rulers, Philip IV and Isabella, and

¹²Dandelet, Thomas James. 1999. "Setting the noble stage in baroque Rome: roman palaces, political contest, and social theater, 1600 - 1700". *Life and the Arts in the Baroque Palaces of Rome / The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, New York*. Stefanie Walker and Frederick Hammond, Eds. Maria Giulia Barberini. 38-51.

¹³ Brown, Jonathan and Elliott, J.H. *A Palace for a King*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003 pg. 150

¹⁴ For detailed reconstructions of the Hall of Realms see Brown and Elliott, *A Palace*, pg. 149-202. Also see Álvarez Lopera, José. "The Hall of Realms: The Present State of Knowledge and a Reconsideration" In *Paintings for the Planet King*. London: Museo Nacional del Prado in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2005. pg. 91-107

¹⁵ Álvarez Lopera, José. "The Hall of Realms: The Present State of Knowledge and a Reconsideration" In *Paintings for the Planet King*. London: Museo Nacional del Prado in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2005. pg. 91-107

¹⁶ See source 13 pg. 150

Spain's future ruler, Prince Baltasar Carlos. The equestrian portraits of the royal family are a clear representation of Spanish strength and dynastic continuity.¹⁷ The theme of dynastic continuity is distinctively illustrated through the sequence of the paintings: the past, present, and future of Spain are all presented to the viewer in close proximity. This is done through the placement of the most recent Habsburg line of succession. These paintings begin with the former king, Philip III of Spain (Fig. 1) whose portrait was placed next to his wife's, Margaret of Austria (Fig. 2). Opposite the paintings of the former rulers of Spain was the reigning king, Philip IV of Spain (Fig. 3) and his wife Isabella of Bourbon (Fig. 4). Lastly, hung between his mother and father above the exit door was the portrait of Prince Baltasar Carlos (Fig. 5), the future king of Spain. These portraits show stability simply by their arrangement within the room. With these portraits the message is apparent that the Habsburg lineage has been and will continue to be a dominant and capable power in Spain.

Both Philip III and the Prince Baltasar Carlos are shown wearing full royal attire, grasping their commanders' batons, and most importantly engaging with the viewer. The former king is presented to us as the confident ruler he was, staring directly at the onlooker with his body positioned slightly toward them. The portrait of his grandson is perhaps even bolder. Prince Baltasar Carlos is depicted full of confidence as if ready to rule in this moment. He too, is staring directly at the viewer with his body positioned nearly in full view of the onlooker. His horse mirrors the same youthful, spritely qualities as the young prince. Given the shared characteristics of the portraits of Philip III and Prince Baltasar Carlos, it is peculiar that we do not get the same lively features with Philip IV. Although the current king of Spain is in the same stance and dressed similarly to the attire worn by his father and son, it is quite distinctive that he is the only subject of all of the portraits to not engage with the viewer. Furthermore, his horse does not possess the same energetic qualities as the rest of the Habsburg males' mount. Regardless of these restrained details, Philip IV still maintains the stance of the horse and carries many of the same features painted in the portraits of the other Habsburg men. His depiction is slightly more muted, which was not uncommon in Velázquez's portraiture of Philip IV.

During Velázquez's time as court painter for Philip IV, he exercised a restraint in the portraits of his monarch and employer. In Velázquez's portrayals of Philip, the king is rarely shown in grand costume, of powerful stature, or with elaborate decoration. Moreover, Philip is certainly never shown as bold by Velázquez's hand as he is represented in the equestrian portrait of 1634. In Velázquez's equestrian portrait of Philip, the usual restrained representation of the king has subsided greatly. It is strange to see Philip in such lavish costume and with such confident stature as in the instance of Velázquez's equestrian portrait. The equestrian portrait appears to defy all the elements that Velázquez had adhered to so faithfully throughout his career. Velázquez however, was not the only famous artist to take on an equestrian portrait of Philip IV. It is fair to acknowledge that other well-known artists of the Baroque era made equestrian portraits of Philip IV, too. The great Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens made an elaborate equestrian painting of Philip IV (Fig. 6) during his visit to Madrid in 1628.¹⁸ He painted Philip as a confident, tenacious ruler, and it is said that Olivares praised Ruben's portrayal of this king.¹⁹ Rubens's painting fit well with Olivares' hopes to convey the strength of the crown and in turn the value of his decisions for the crown. Velázquez's portrayal of the king is not then a curious instance with this in mind. Velázquez is said to have secured his role as court painter with the help of Olivares, and it is not unimaginable to think that Velázquez may have felt indebted to Olivares. At the same time, Velázquez may not have felt the need to make Philip IV's portrayal as elaborate as Rubens. Portraying Philip IV on a horse may have been enough to convey the idea of power.

Equestrian portraiture has its roots in antiquity and can be traced back to the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. A portrait of a ruler mounted on a horse emanates strong ideals of power that are undeniable to the eye. Olivares surely had power in representational form in mind when envisioning the equestrian portraits of the royal family. Not only was the equestrian type taken into consideration, but other forms of iconography were placed in the portraits to assure the viewers they were witnessing the wealth of the power Spain possessed. The most noticeable feature in this equestrian series is the stance of the horse, better known as the *lavade*. This particular position of the horse is important in conveying the strength of the rider.²⁰ It is a stance that is hard to maintain and takes skill to master and all the male sitters manage to hold it with ease. Through this specific position of the horse, the

¹⁷ For further explanation on dynastic continuity see Brown, Jonathan and Elliott, J.H. *A Palace for a King*. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2003

¹⁸ Volk, Mary Crawford. 1980. "Rubens in Madrid and the Decoration of the Salón Nuevo in the Palace." *The Burlington Magazine*. 122 (924): pg. 176

¹⁹ Liedtke, Walter A., and John F. Moffitt. 1981. "Velázquez, Olivares, and the Baroque Equestrian Portrait." *The Burlington Magazine*. 123 (942): 529-537.

²⁰ See source 19 pg. 529-537.

association is made between the Habsburg men's capability to rule and their ability to control a powerful horse. Similarly, the baton and the red sash that the male riders possess also infer their ability to rule and their military strength. The baton and sash were two objects that would have belonged to high-ranking officials in the military and although none of these men fought in a war, they are presented this way to connect them to the historical paintings. Another interesting article worn by all of the men is the insignia of the Golden Fleece. The Golden Fleece was a knightly order that devoted itself to the Christian cause.²¹ The presence of this insignia confirmed the Spanish ruler's role as fervent defender of the Catholic faith. Philip and his family, as the current monarchs of Spain, were in turn also the current defenders of the Catholic faith. All of these symbols in the equestrian portraits in the Hall of Realms tied together Olivares' hope to portray a strong Spain.

It was of utmost importance to the Count-Duke Olivares that Philip IV, along with his family, be placed in a flattering light. As the favorite to the king, the policies and major decisions that the king fronted were typically designed by Olivares.²² And as a result of this, a carefully constructed portrayal of the royal family was beneficial to both Olivares and Philip IV. It appears Olivares used the equestrian portraits in the Hall of Realms as one of his many efforts to elevate the image of the crown in an effort to legitimize his own success. The Hall of Realms in Buen Retiro, the project that Olivares had spent years laboring over had finally come to fruition. The collaboration between painting and politics in Spain during the reign of Philip IV is epitomized in the equestrian portraits in the Hall of Realms.

²¹ Paul, J. Balfour. 1908. "The Order of the Golden Fleece". *The Scottish Historical Review*.5 (20): 405-410.

²² Elliott, J.H. *Richelieu and Olivares*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984. pg. 32



Figure 1: Diego Velázquez, *Philip III*, 1629-1635, oil on canvas, 118 in. x 83.4 in. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/felipe-iii-on-horseback/>>



Figure 2: Diego Velázquez and others, *Queen Margaret of Austria*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 116 in. x 83.4 in. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/queen-margarita-de-austria-wife-of-felipe-iii/>>



Figure 3: Diego Velázquez, *Philip IV on Horseback*, 1634-1635, oil on canvas, 119.3 in. x 125 in. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/felipe-iv-on-horseback/>>



Figure 4: Diego Velázquez and others, *Isabella of Bourbon on Horseback*, 1634-1635, oil on canvas, 118.5 in. x 124 in. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/queen-isabel-de-bourbon-wife-of-felipe-iv-on-horseback/>>



Figure 5: Diego Velázquez and others, *Prince Baltasar Carlos on Horseback*, ca. 1635, oil on canvas, 83.2 in. x 70 in. Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, Spain. <<https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/online-gallery/on-line-gallery/obra/prince-baltasar-carlos-on-horseback/>>



Figure 6: After Peter Paul Rubens, *Philip IV of Spain on Horseback*, ca. 1628, oil on canvas, 132.6 in. x 103.5 in. Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. <<http://www.virtualuffizi.com/philip-iv-of-spain-on-horseback.html>>