Art Appreciation Lecture Series 2018
The Hidden Language of Art: symbol of allusion

The enigma of Velázquez's *Las Meninas*

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Lecture summary:

The lecture concentrates on a masterpiece of Western art, Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, produced at the very end of the artist's life, in 1656. This picture has been the subject of widespread interpretation in an attempt to decipher the enigma posited within the composition itself: What is being painted on the hidden canvas whose back is shown to the viewer? What is the source of the reflection of the royal couple in the mirror? Scholars, theorists and critics have all tried, and failed, to achieve a single coherent interpretation for the painting, to grasp as it were, its 'essence'. In this lecture I will explore some of the interpretations advanced by scholars, while arguing that the painting privileges the process of becoming over being, and this contingency is one of its essential characteristics, allowing it to be renewed and not depleted over time.

Slide list:
2. Diego Velázquez, *Pope Innocent X*, 1649-50, oil on canvas, 140 x 120 cm, Galleria Doria-Pamphili, Rome.
3. Diego Velázquez, *Juan de Pareja*, 1650, oil on canvas, 81.3 x 69.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
7. Diego Velázquez, *Portrait of a man (possibly José Nieto)*, late 1630s, oil on canvas, 76.3 x 65.3 cm, English Heritage, Apsley House.
10. Perspective diagram of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* by Martin Kemp.
13. Diego Velázquez, *Self-portrait*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 45 x 38 cm, Museu de Belles Arts de València.

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Selected references:

Alpers, Svetlana, 'Interpretation without Representation, or, the viewing of Las Meninas', *Representations*, 1, (1983), pp. 30-42.


