

## Made in God's Image: Velazquez's Portraits of Dwarves

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As a painter in the Spanish court, it was the job of Diego Velazquez to portray the nobility of the court in the most favorable light. Yet Velazquez did not paint only kings and queens, but he also focused on even the most obscure members, such as the palace dwarves. It was not unusual to have paintings of dwarves, but the way in which Velazquez portrayed them makes his portraits distinct. For instance, Velazquez did not paint them as the mindless buffoons that people generally thought them to be. He portrayed them, instead, as intelligent and rational human beings. Furthermore, rather than focusing on the differences between the subject and the viewer, Velazquez emphasizes the similarities. Velazquez demonstrates the relation by using the Baroque technique of opening up the space in order to make the viewer feel more involved. Furthermore, Velazquez often paints his subjects against dark backgrounds and highlights their faces so that the viewer will acknowledge their mind and thoughts. One of the purposes of Baroque painting is to reveal and to apply the truth of God to the lives of the common people, which Velazquez seeks to do in revealing the humanity of the dwarves. Contrary to the prevailing attitude which treated the court dwarves as play things, Velazquez reveals their fundamental humanity.

During in 17th century, life in the Spanish court was stressful because the rules were so complicated and tedious. The court members constantly had to be on guard so as not to offend the royalty. One of the ways the Spanish nobility coped with this stress was through dwarves, who did not have to follow the same rules as the rest of the court. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, dwarves were known as curiosities, which means that they "were abnormal phenomena of the natural world which attested to the immense variety of divine creation" (Brown 143). Thus, the members of the Spanish court were intrigued and amused by their small size, but did not consider them important enough to follow the court customs. The dwarves were not just a diversion but performed another, much more demeaning role as well. Jonathan Brown writes that the dwarves

were considered to be a negative affirmation of beauty, which they revealed by a perverse contrast; deformities of the mind and body were a way to measure and enhance the appearance of perfection. Thus, the reasoning went, a dwarf in the company of a king or queen pointedly emphasized the perfection of the ruler. (143)

This sort of negative affirmation was appealing to the Spanish court, since the royalty were not particularly attractive. "Drastic" inbreeding had caused the "large Habsburg jaw" in many members of the royal family (Riggs 171). By looking the portraits of Philip IV and his wife Mariana, one can see that many members of the royalty were neither attractive nor had a commanding presence. In portraits such as these they relied on fine clothing as a symbol of authority. The dwarves, however, provided them with another visual advantage.

Another reason the dwarves were found useful is because they did not have to worry about offending the king as others did. Since they were not under the rules of the court, they could say what they pleased without the fear of being punished. Members of the court often took advantage of this fact and used the dwarves "to bring to royalty's attention to matters of moment which important interests wished hushed up for their own profit or advantage" (Riggs 172). Despite the dwarves' low station, the nobility listened to them, because they were seen as a type of oracle. The Spanish believed in the saying "there is truth in the mouths of children and fools" (Riggs 171). Though one might think that this power would allow the dwarves to have the dignity and respect that they deserved, it did not. Instead, a dwarf was merely seen as either a spectacle or a pawn to achieve the personal desire of someone in authority.

Velazquez, however, did not see the dwarves as meaningless distractions as much of the court did. Rather, in his portraits, they are striking characters that have an emotional quality with which the viewer can connect. As Moret writes, "...instead of...[making] us...feel uncomfortable or disgusted, the sight of these portraits arouses in us only a feeling of admiration..." (91). These men are also not to be pitied or gawked at. Rather, they seem strong, kind, and capable. In his portraits, Velazquez shows that dwarves are more than moving accessories; they are people with intelligence and personality. In order to portray intelligence, Velazquez does not try to hide their small bodies, but rather he often emphasizes them by painting his subjects seated. Enriqueta Harris writes, "...the seated figures reveal more clearly than any standing pose their dwarfish stature and stunted limbs, and bring closer their remarkable heads, with varied expressions: serious, jovial, imbecile" (108). While initially one might think that the emphasis on their bodies would distract the viewer, it in fact leads to greater understanding. The accurate depiction of the body allows the viewer to see their size, but the emphasis is on the dwarves' faces showing the connection the viewer can have with them. Through these portraits, Velazquez affirms that their size does not have to be in opposition with their worth.

The portrait that best illustrates Velazquez's radical view of the dwarves is his portrait of a dwarf named El Primo. This portrait contrasts greatly with the stereotype of a dwarf who merely laughs, jokes, and has no real intelligence. Instead, in this portrait, El Primo is surrounded by objects that emphasize his intellect. For example, his wrinkled brow shows his astuteness, while the glue pot and books show his literacy (Moret 92). Moreover, these signs of intelligence are well deserved. El Primo was not there to entertain, but rather was attached to the Secretary of the Privy Chamber. Though he had an official job in the court, it was still a miniscule one. It was his job to stamp documents with a facsimile of the king's signature. He could not stamp anything, however, unless the secretary was present (Brown 147). Whereas El Primo was able to advance in obtaining an official position at court, he was, however, allowed to perform only a very small task. In this

painting, Velazquez illustrates El Primo's intelligence through emphasizing his head. In the words of Moret, the large hat "serves as a background from which his head stands out with great vigour" (92). The hat causes the viewer to pay attention to his face, which is kind and intelligent. Furthermore, the sweeping landscape makes him look monumental, but the book covers half his body "removing all doubt about his true size" (Brown 148). Though El Primo is a small man, he has great intelligence.

Velazquez's portrait of Sebastian de Morra seems to embody the struggle against stereotypes. The most striking thing about this portrait is the subject's fierceness and intelligence. He has dark, challenging eyes and his brow is furrowed, indicating that he is in deep thought. Moreover, there is light shining on his forehead which emphasizes his intelligence against the dark background and his dark clothes. (Adams 65). From these details, it is implied that de Morra has had to fight hard for acknowledgement of his intelligence. As Adams has observed, "his foreshortened legs and clenched fists convey a sense of matter-of-fact self-assertions" (Adams 65). The clenched fists also portray a kind of defense against the court and their stereotypes of dwarves. He also stares directly at the viewer and even seems to challenge him (Adams 65). The direct gaze indicates that he does not consider himself beneath the viewer. In this way, Velazquez opens the space of the painting to the viewer, who is forced to return de Morra's gaze and consider his intelligence. It is hard to imagine Morra as a mere court distraction.

Velazquez offers an interesting contrast to these two strong depictions of dwarves in his portrait, El Nino de Vallecas. At first this portrait appears to follow the stereotypical views of dwarves. Velazquez presents a man with "a stunted, bowed leg...thrust toward the viewer and the characteristic facial features...sedulously rendered. The slight tilt of the head to the left suggests a certain loss of control, while the hands absently shuffle a deck of cards, a traditional symbol of the fool" (Brown 143). This portrait does not contain the symbols of intelligence that there are in El Primo's painting. The "sedulous" look does not mean, however, that Velazquez is mocking him or indicating that he is merely a fool (Brown 143). There is a depth to his painting that is not evident in depictions of dwarves by other artists. Brown points out that his expression is engaging and that "even the technique of execution lends a soft, warm aura to the composition which somehow engages our sympathy" (Brown 143). Moreover, his gaze is kind and vulnerable, causing the viewer to be drawn to him. Furthermore, the amount of skill that Velazquez put forth indicates his significance. Brown writes that "by dedicating the same artistry to the dwarf as to the prince, Velazquez reverses the flow of energy in the conventional contrast between the perfect and the deformed, forcing us to contemplate the dwarf as a person and not merely as a pretext to glorify the beauty of the prince" (146). Even though El Nino does not appear to have the great intelligence of El Primo and de Morra, the deep expression in his eyes forces the viewer to acknowledge that he is a human being. Velazquez illustrates the folly of believing that his deformity could take away from his humanity.

Through opening up the space of the painting and revealing humanity in those who are often merely sneered at, Velazquez brought truth to his audience in a new way. One of the desires of Baroque painting is to apply the truth of the gospel to common man. Through his paintings, Velazquez reminded his audience that one of the teachings of the Bible is that all men are of worth because they are made in God's image. In Velazquez's portraits of the dwarves, the audience is forced to look these men in the eye and acknowledge their humanity. Furthermore, by emphasizing the dwarves' humanity, Velazquez also emphasizes the cruelty of their situation. The Baroque era was supposed to bring truth to the lives of common man, and, through his work, Velazquez shines that light in unlikely places and allows us to see God's work in the unexpected.

#### Works Cited

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