

Tanya J. Tiffany. *Diego Velázquez's Early Paintings and the Culture of Seventeenth-Century Seville*.

University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012. xiii + 240 pp. \$79.95. ISBN: 978-0-271-05379-0.

The early paintings of Diego Velázquez appeal to the modern viewer, but because his most famous images were not painted in Seville, these youthful works have never received as much attention as the pictures he later created in Madrid. Unlike his paintings at court, however, the Sevillian works represent a truly diverse range of subjects, from the *bodegones* (genre paintings) to religious themes to portraits.

For almost four decades, this focus on Velázquez's activity in Madrid has produced an emphasis on patronage as an interpretive perspective, and simultaneously on the artist's success in social climbing. Tiffany also covers patrons in Seville, and Velázquez's connections to Juan de Fonseca certainly facilitated his later career. Tiffany's detailed account of these and other Sevillian links make a substantial contribution in this area.

Yet Tiffany's most important chapters seek to reconstruct the social imaginary surrounding several major Sevillian paintings, where she connects these works to gender roles, race, and the problem of controlling sexual desire among the devout. In her discussion of *Madre Jerónima de la Fuente*, Tiffany makes an altogether persuasive argument for seeing this shockingly powerful image of the intrepid nun as an enactment of the phenomenon of the *mujer varonil*, the virile woman who not only transgressed gender boundaries, but frequently turned them on their head in literary dramas seen on the stage. Shown brandishing a crucifix like a weapon in the painting, it is not hard to believe that *Madre Jerónima* risked a dangerous and unpredictable voyage to become first abbess of the new convent of Santa Clara in the Philippines. Jerónima practiced the ideal Franciscan obligations of obedience, silence, and self-mortification, but to an extreme that was actually more militant than modest, filling her mouth with stones, carrying the cross on her back, and

hanging herself on it with ropes (66–69). The result of making the viewer aware of such data is not to overturn the initial reaction to her painted character as *varonil*, but to reinforce it.

The chapter on the *Kitchen Servant* examines the presence of African slaves in Seville and above all the use of blackness by Spanish theologians, who linked the dark races to notions of misery and sin, though occasionally such souls could be saved by Christian enlightenment. As recent observers agree, this inward event of revelation and conversion is what Velázquez depicts.

Tiffany makes the useful observation that unlike white domestics, this dark slave does not make eye contact with the viewer. Tiffany's reconstructed gazes in these paintings can be sexual and thus might run the danger of producing a conflict between devotion and desire. She relies on writers who locate human vice in the eye and warn young friars not to expose themselves to temptation by looking at wanton women. But what was the diligent priest to do about the need for pictures of that most beautiful lady of all, the nubile Virgin Mary of the Immaculate Conception? Velázquez's own solution to this challenge was to paint her with consistently downcast eyes that refuse to meet the viewer's gaze out of modesty. Because the convent for which Velázquez's *Immaculate Conception* was commissioned housed males, "new measures were taken at El Carmen to ensure the friars' sexual abstinence" (45), and the pendant image of the *Vision of St. John the Evangelist* was painted to offer a model of virginity for the male, whose rapt gaze is fixed on the distant apparition of a woman seen safely from afar.

Tanya Tiffany's readings are frequently based on written texts more than on visual images, and the space given to treatises versus paintings makes it clear that she believes the culture of Seville is made comprehensible by reading writers who were authorized by the church rather than by combining visual stimuli with vernacular writings. While I wish she would sometimes broaden her discussion to include more interrogations of gender, race, and sexuality, I also acknowledge that her evenhanded listing of multiple philosophies of interpretation shows that her goal was to make this book as much a reference work as an exposition of personal preferences.

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