Giles R. M. Knox. *The Late Paintings of Velázquez: Theorizing Painterly Performance*.

Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009. vii + 191 pp. index. illus. bibl. $99.95. ISBN: 978–0–7546–6677–6.

Just when you thought there was nothing left to say about *Las Meninas* along comes a book that proves you wrong. Knox's *The Late Paintings of Velázquez* approaches *Las Meninas* and *The Spinners*, Velázquez's other late, great painting, from the modern perspective of style as meaning. In Knox's book, Velázquez's open painterly brushwork is, among other things, a political statement on the relative

merits of *colorito* and *disegno.* In a period in which *disegno* triumphed, Velázquez came down vehemently on the side of the Venetians. Knox thus sees Velázquez's *Spinners* and *Las Meninas* as personal manifestos on the art of painting: only *colorito* is able to create the illusion of reality that convinces the "tableau really is vivant" (7).

Knox reviews the established art theory beginning with Vasari, whose opinion on Titian and the Venetians is echoed by Pacheco and Carducho. Pacheco, Velázquez's teacher and father-in-law, judged the *borrón,* the Spanish term for the visible unblended brushstroke, was no more than a "labor saving shortcut instead of an aesthetic with its own distinct and positive values" (19). For him, paintings executed in a painterly manner were much easier to produce than those completed to a higher level of finish. Carducho, the other important art theorist in Velázquez's Spain, although willing to accept Titian's talent, could not produce a theoretical armature in which performative brushwork could be understood. *Colorito* didn't stand a chance in Spain because it drew attention to the artist's hand, undermining the aspirations of painting to the status of a liberal art.

Velázquez, whom Knox characterizes as a rebel of sorts, developed his own opinion. Immersed in the paintings of Titian in his dual role of court portraitist and curator of collections, Velázquez came to believe in the handedness of art, by which Knox means open painterly brushwork and the artist's hand, since one invokes the other. Rather than write art theory, however, Velázquez laid out his ideas in two great paintings. In *Las Meninas* the artist's hand signifying his craft is paused in applying paint to a large canvas seen from the back. In the past historians have focused on what is not said, but Knox asks us to consider what is said, and the canvas, stretchers, and nails prominently displayed underscore the materiality of painting. In *The Spinners* the hands of the spinners are active producing the thread that will be woven into the beautiful tapestry displayed in the background. By locating the production of thread in the foreground Velázquez establishes the mechanical as fundamental to the finished work of art.

For me, Knox is at his most interesting when he develops the friendship between Velázquez and Marco Boschini, a relatively unknown Venetian art theorist. Boschini, who published his art theory after Velázquez had died, was first to champion *colorito* as practiced by the Venetians. Knox proposes Velázquez and Boschini shared a meeting of the minds in Venice, where Velázquez traveled twice in 1649–50. Boschini did not alter the Spaniard's theory; rather, he confirmed what Velázquez already believed and what he would state clearly in his *Spinners* and *Las Meninas*, which are the summation of his career: only painterly brushwork can produce the illusion of movement that makes an image come to life.

I was less convinced by Knox's analysis of Velázquez's painting in the Meadows Museum. Identified traditionally as a Sybil, but Knox believes she is the allegorical *Pittura*, Velazquez's enigmatic female pressing a tablet supports his argument for handedness. Knox, who believes Velázquez might have intended a parting gift for Boschini — he dates the picture later than the generally accepted 1644–48 — interprets an allegory of the creative act according to three foundational stories of painting. Told in Pacheco's *Arte* (Seville, 1649), these stories — Dibutades outlining

her lover, Narcissus embracing his image, and the Creation of Adam — create a complexity of meaning that is belied by the simplicity of the image. The breathless female pressing her forefinger against a blank tablet is difficult to match to any of the stories, and also to the art of painting because of the absence of a paintbrush. The fact that Titian sometimes painted with his fingers only complicates things more, a reminder that the simplest explanation is usually the most convincing.

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https://doi.org/10.1086/652594 Published online by Cambridge University Press