

The Emergence of Aesthetic Self-Reference

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Self-reference is by no measure an unusual phenomenon in aesthetic history. The Renaissance in particular witnesses a veritable explosion of self-referential works. Several of the great classics of late Renaissance art are obsessively self-referential, including *Hamlet*, *Don Quixote*, and *Las Meninas*, painted by Diego Velázquez in 1656:



Las Meninas is a striking example of the radical changes introduced by seventeenth-century aesthetics. Almost everything about this painting is controversial, but it's generally agreed that it is meant to represent the artist, Diego Velázquez, painting a portrait of King Philip IV and his wife, and that it presents the perspective of the King and Queen as they are being painted. Various members of the royal household are also present, including the royal Infanta and her maids of honor, the "las meninas" of the title.

Generative Anthropology, my methodology, views representation in scenic terms. The scene of representation consists of a center, that which is signified, and the periphery, the figures who give attention to the center, and whose attention is directed by symbolic signifiers. The scene of representation is not just a model of communication, but the deep structure of human social order, an ethical model of the human as a cultural animal. Eric Gans posits a singular origin for representation, and for this reason the scene of representation has a recognizable identity throughout its history.[\[1\]](#)

Art can be characterized as an interpretation of the scene of representation, and in this sense, art is akin to anthropology, an investigation of what is quintessentially human. Gans proposes that we take *the place* of the scene of representation within a work of art as “the independent variable of esthetic history” (“[The Esthetic in History](#)”). In other words, aesthetic history can be understood most economically in terms of how *the placement* and configuration of the scene of representation *within* artworks changes over time.

Las Meninas is a remarkable confirmation of Gans’s thesis, since it literally takes the scene of aesthetic representation as its subject matter, and it offers a novel perspective on the scene, thus exemplifying historical change. It’s a quintessential work of modern art, an explicit and self-conscious representation of an aesthetic scene, and a fine example of how the Renaissance revises the classical aesthetic. In Gans’s formulation, the classical aesthetic focused on the central figures and left the audience, the periphery of the scene, unthematized. This suggests that the place of the scene of representation in the classical aesthetic was the physical location of the artwork or performance and its reception. *Las Meninas* shows how the subject-matter of the aesthetic has expanded to include the audience or the periphery of the scene.

Velazquez’s painting not only expands the possibilities of aesthetic content, it also reverses the classical aesthetic by excluding from our view the nominally central figures, the King and Queen. *Las Meninas* gives us, the spectators, the perspective of the King and Queen, the ostensible figures of the center. The traditionally-central figures are represented only in the mirror in the background, in which the royal couple is strangely blurred, perhaps due to distance. The mirror, of course, is a figure of art, of representation as mimesis, and of self-examination.

In *Las Meninas*, the conventional relationship between center and periphery is overturned. The royal couple retains their real-world political power, but in aesthetic terms the center has become peripheral, and the periphery is now central. Also notable is that the artist himself is included among the audience.

The dramatic situation of the painting, of course, is actually a fiction. To the extent that it’s based on real life, the artist would be looking at a large mirror. The fiction of the painting makes the artist into a spectator of the center, and of his own work, but in fact he is the master of the artwork. So the artist’s role in the painting is equivocal and paradoxical. He is the subject (that which is painted), the spectator (of his own painting and the royal couple), and the master (creator) of the painting, all at the same time, positions which usually exclude each other.[\[2\]](#)

Whether the artist is literally looking into a mirror or not, the act of painting himself involves self-examination. Velazquez is not just representing himself, he is critically examining his art and himself in his role as artist. He has become his own audience,

affirming his worthiness of representation. To some extent, this painting constitutes an argument for Velazquez's importance as a member of the royal court.[3] In the 17th century the artist is becoming an important cultural figure, not merely an anonymous craftsman, as with so many medieval artists. The artist does not merely reaffirm tradition anymore, he creates new traditions and discovers new truths; not least of these new traditions is art itself, which is taking on a much larger role in European society. We enter now into what has been called the "era of art" in which a painting takes on a new role as a movable artwork created for the purpose of aesthetic appreciation.[4] In the Renaissance, "the image emancipated itself from its predominantly cultic and devotional functions" (Pericolo 22), a development that seems entirely natural to us but which is actually peculiar to the last 500 years of our history.

The artist, Velazquez, is depicted in the act of painting, not posing for a painting. In fact, the painting has been compared to an impromptu photograph, capturing a moment in time. The artist's facial expression is thoughtful and expresses, I believe, a certain inwardness, comparable to Hamlet contemplating a skull and meditating on mortality. In regard to the Renaissance representation of interiority, Gans remarks insightfully,

The sign of sacrality that justifies the central position of the figure of medieval religious art has now been unpacked from the center and articulated as a tension between the public scene and the private inwardness—the "soul" of the protagonist. (*Originary Thinking* 157)

In other words, the inward struggle or conflict of Renaissance protagonists, which often involves a tension with their public role, functions as a mark of divinity and authority. An inward depth and resistance is now, in effect, a sign of secular election. The artist, in particular, is a chosen one of the gods. Velazquez, in his self-portrait here, is not especially alienated (as with many centralized figures like Hamlet), but his face and bodily position express a certain tension which is associated specifically with artistic creation, and which serves to distinguish him with a quasi-divinity.

The notable interiority of Renaissance protagonists expresses the aesthetic self-awareness of art in this period, most obviously in the case of artist figures; but also in the sense that protagonists are often aware of being on stage, as subject to the judgment of the spectators, as for example in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus*, in which Coriolanus's dependence on the crowd, and his awareness of and resistance to his dependence, conspire to bring about his disgrace and downfall.[5] The self-awareness of modern art is demonstrated, in part, by the self-awareness of its central figures, who are aware of themselves as subject to spectatorship.

The viewer of *Las Meninas* is placed in a peculiar position by the subject matter. In a way, this painting is all about spectators and spectatorship. The subjects of the painting are all

spectators within the fictional event of the scene. The royal couple are able to see themselves in the mirror, while they are surrounded by the members of the royal court. On one level, most of the subjects in the picture are looking at the royal couple, but on another level, they are looking at us, the viewers. We are aware that they are looking at us, and, just as important, they are aware of being observed by a viewer. Virtually everyone in this scene is conscious of seeing and of being seen. The importance of spectatorship in the painting demonstrates a nascent anthropological awareness that significance is dependent on the attention of the periphery, which creates “a grace that emanates from the sacred center,” as Gans puts it (*OT* 151). Significance is understood as explicitly scenic in character, not independent and autonomous.

Art creates a fictional world that we are aware of as such, a world with its own seeming logic and coherence. For this reason, there’s something disorienting about this painting, and it has been called “vertiginous” in its effect on viewers. The artist, the Infanta, and the other subjects are *outside* a painting within the world of the painting, aware of it being created. But at the same time they are *within* the painting we are viewing. So the subjects of the painting are both within and without the world of a painting at the same time. Because of this overlap of different, mutually-exclusive perspectives, the painting blurs the distinction between the artwork and the world. This confusion involves our position as spectators too. Consider that the painting that Velazquez is portrayed as painting is, arguably, the painting we are viewing, that is, if he is looking at a mirror. We occupy the place of the King and Queen, so that we are the subject of the fictional painting we see the artist creating, but we are also outside the world of the painting, viewing it in a museum or on the web. The fact we typically view a mechanical reproduction of the actual painting introduces another level of complexity. *Las Meninas* introduces a deliberate confusion between reality and fiction, audience and artwork, sign and representation—an important and typical effect of aesthetic self-reference, one which we need to investigate further from an historical and anthropological perspective.

The reversal of the positions of the scenic center and the periphery in *Las Meninas* has larger political and cultural implications. The nominally-divine figures of the King and Queen have been demoted to a fuzzy background mirror image. “The first commentator of the work criticized the fact that [Velazquez] had [included himself as a member of the royal court], accusing Velazquez of excessive pride” (Stoichita 275). We know, however, that the King displayed the painting in his audience chamber soon after its composition (Stoichita 273). The fact that the royal Infanta takes pride of place in the painting suggests a still strong attachment to divine hierarchy. In terms of the dramatic situation, she is positioned as both peripheral and central at the same time: she is the central focus of the actual picture but on the margin of the fictional scene, and surrounded by other peripheral figures such as the dwarves, the maids, the dog, and the artist. The sacralization of peripheral figures may be derived from the Christian realization that every individual is in equal possession of a soul, an internal scene with its own center, which can substitute for the

public, ritual scene.

Velazquez's painting places a great deal of emphasis on framing, an element of a painting which is conventionally outside of the work proper. We see the stretchers for the artist's canvas, the internal frame for such a painting. The mirror in the background is surrounded by a heavy frame, as are the paintings lining the walls of the room. Furthermore, there is a doorway in the back wall, which frames for us a figure on some stairs who observes the others.[\[6\]](#)

An artistic topos that emerges in the late 15th century is paintings of framed paintings, as we see in this page from a book of hours for Mary of Burgundy,[\[7\]](#) which portrays a painting framed by a cabinet of curiosities:



Here is another example by the same artist:



What is a frame? It has, of course, a formal function. The frame sets off a work of art from the rest of the world and defines its limits. The attention to frames within the work therefore can contribute to the confusion between art and life which we noted. The interest in framing within paintings of the Renaissance is notable and puzzling. What is the source of this fascination with the frame?

From one perspective, frames are simply accidental to the traditions for showing and protecting a painting. Many modern paintings dispense with any external frame. The frame could be seen as simply a "spandrel," an artifact of the historical development of canvas paintings as movable art objects. Obviously, the frame is aesthetic in function, like the painting itself, but as decoration, not subject matter. During the Renaissance, the frame itself becomes the subject matter or part of the subject matter. The key to understanding

the attention paid to frames is that the role of the frame is analogous to the role of the spectator of a work of art. The frame serves to draw our attention to a work of art, marks it as worthy of notice, just as a crowd of spectators would do.

The attention to frames reaches extreme limits in works such as this one, called *Trompe l'oeil. The Reverse of a Framed Painting*, 1668-1672 by Cornelius Norbertus Gijsbrechts:



Stoichita sees this as a negation of painting, but I'm not so sure. This is not just a random painting which has been turned to the wall, but a painting of the back of a painting. There are artworks which in effect negate art. Duchamp's famous Fountain sculpture suggests that the distinction enjoyed by the artwork is simply a result of its museum location, which is a version of a frame:



Frame a toilet with a museum exhibit and it becomes high art. But the attention to frames in early Modern painting is rather different. It could be seen as desacralizing, but I believe it

actually reinforces the sacrality of the image, although on a different level than institutional religion.



On the one hand, a painting like Gysbrechts' *Vanitas* (above) could be viewed as deconstructing the ideal of the image, and the image of a skull is intended to deflate human pride, but it actually reinforces its authority by showing the processes of both creation and disintegration to which the painting is subject. The image is *more* sacred, precisely because it is subject to these historical forces. The various negations of the image serve an apotropaic function, warding off the charge of idolatry by representing its own iconoclastic destruction.

Victor Stoichita, a French art historian, argues that Protestant iconoclasm contributed to the development of artistic self-awareness by bringing about a new awareness of the image as an image. As Protestants were destroying images, Catholics were rediscovering their power (Stoichita 127). Stoichita proposes that Protestant iconoclasm had the unintended

effect of authorizing art as an independent cultural practice, one no longer dependent upon religious sanction. Martin Luther's position on images was that they were *adiaphora*, things indifferent, recognizing that only our worship makes them idolatrous. Luther said, "We are free before these images" (qtd. in Stoichita 129). The Lutheran attitude neutralizes the image, so it is neither divine nor evil; thus making possible a new and modern attitude towards images as art works. Stoichita is correct as far as he goes, but he doesn't consider how the self-aware paintings he discusses actually incorporate and include iconoclastic impulses.



This image, a painting by Pieter Aertsen, *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (1552), speaks to the problem of the frame in an important way. On the left side of this painting, we find a scene from the Bible, the famous episode in which Jesus visits the home of Mary and Martha, and in which Martha is rebuked by Jesus after she complains that Mary is not helping her with the serving chores. What's unusual is that we see this episode from the kitchen through a doorway or some kind of opening in the kitchen wall. The painting is dominated by the objects in the kitchen, including a large leg of lamb. The still life of kitchen objects dwarfs the dramatic scene of Jesus with Mary and Martha, which it frames for us. Note that the kitchen objects are painted in a hyper-realistic style which dramatically contrasts with the more old-fashioned religious-style scene with Jesus. The framed scene of Mary and Martha is completely conventional, but the scenic foreground creates a strikingly original work of art.

The biblical episode is framed again by an opening which resembles a fireplace but leads to an embrasure in the outside wall. The figures who witness Jesus's rebuke of Martha are apostles who were traditionally reputed to have been there. As Victor Stoichita points out, the kitchen objects have symbolic meaning, notably the large piece of meat dominating the painting, which contrasts sharply with the spiritual style and content of the biblical episode. Jesus, the sacred, is framed by the profane, the meat, just as the soul or spirit is framed by the body or the flesh. The painting embodies the fundamental Christian duality of spirit and

flesh, soul and body (Stoichita 40-45).

But along with this contrast, there are also affinities between the framing scene and the inset drama. The leg of lamb can be seen as a reference to Jesus the lamb of God, who is sacrificed for the sins of humanity. The red flower, which intrudes on the biblical scene, is stuck into a piece of dough or bread, referencing Jesus as the bread of life. The red flower is a carnation, which puns on Jesus as the Incarnation of God.

The Incarnation itself is a frame: God, who is spirit, takes on a physical body that becomes essential to his identity. After his Crucifixion, he is bodily resurrected, and he physically ascends to heaven. As a God-man, Jesus is unique in being incarnated among the lowly, not the powerful. Unlike the Pharaoh and other human deities, Jesus embraces his humanity, his vulnerability and frailty. In addition, the Gospels, especially the Passion, serve to frame Christ in a unique way. Traditionally, the sacred and the profane exclude each other, but with the Incarnation, the fundamental sacred distinction between God and man is internalized within one paradoxical figure, who bridges that gap, and who serves as a model of identity radically unlike ancient Greek, Roman, and Egyptian heroes. The doctrine of the incarnation may be the inspiration for the idea that each individual is, in a sense, a son of God like Jesus. Every person has a soul, a sacred center within them, incarnated in a body; it's the body, the flesh, that leads individuals into conflicts and sufferings such as Jesus endured also. The Incarnation is what makes possible the Crucifixion. We take Christian humanism for granted today, but in truth this is a radical concept of the human. The new authorization of individuals in Christian humanism is key to the development of Modernity, since it challenges a belief system that reduces individuals to their role in a class hierarchy. The new role given to individuals by analogy to the Incarnation is a key to the emergence of aesthetic self-awareness during the Renaissance.

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Notes

[1] For more on Generative Anthropology, see my essay "[Why Generative Anthropology?](#)" in the web-based *Chronicles of Love and Resentment* #445.

[2] Cf. Searle on "Las Meninas and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation."

[3] Alpers, 33.

[4] Pericolo 22, quoting Belting.

[5] See Van Oort on *Coriolanus*.

[6] "To the rear and at right stands Don José Nieto Velázquez—the queen's chamberlain during the 1650s, and head of the royal tapestry works—who may have been a relative of the artist" ("Las Meninas").

[7] The unidentified but influential artist is known as the Master of Mary of Burgundy.