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LAS MENINAS – INTERPRETATION NARRATIVES THROUGHOUT CENTURIES

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to focus on the interpretations of some 20th and 21st century artworks inspired by the painting *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez. The analysis is to show the potential of artistic techniques, the inventiveness of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artists, and the meaningful re-readings of the original work. The author concludes that imitative artworks lacking a conceptual dimension are only historical references with no significant role in the history of art due to their submission to the influence of the Baroque model. In contrast, significant conceptualisation and creative attitude towards *Las Meninas* add to intentionally meaningful interpretations, showing the deeper aspects of the masterpiece, and thus becoming autonomous artworks which could be presumably created regardless of the original source of inspiration. The artworks under scrutiny have been selected with regard to their artistic techniques and their interpretative potential which served as a means to define the level of their creative autonomy.

Keywords: inspiration, interpretation, forma, conceptualism, transformation

A courtly scene as a source of inspiration

This paper tells the story of *Las Meninas* by Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez, which was painted in 1656. Some art historians regard it as one of the greatest achievements in the history of art.¹ However, I do not mean to dwell on the historical background of the painting, but rather consider its reception and its influence on the most venerated artists since its creation. This could be also viewed as the need to “supplement” the history of *Las Meninas* by the list of artworks and their

¹ S. Alpers, “Interpretation without Representation, or, the Viewing of *Las Meninas*”, in: *Representations*, University of California Press, No. 1. (Feb., 1983), p. 32: http://ssbothwell.com/documents/las_meninas/Alpers_Svetlana-Interpretation_without_representation.pdf

creators affected by this masterpiece throughout the centuries.² This painting is a real challenge for many artists, who enter into personal and creative dialogue with it, or try to exploit it as a source of visual allusions, allowing them to create an artistic resonance among the public. I am particularly interested in the inspirational potential of *Las Meninas* and the time span of the never-ending and multi-faceted process of plastic and mental transformations of this work. This type of “magical” impact on artists throughout history reveals a change of its historical perception by the subsequent generations of artists, allowing us to interpret it taking into account its many emerging versions which challenge the original and bear the traces of the time at which they were created.³ Our question is whether *Las Meninas* should be viewed as the greatest achievement in the history of painting, an exceptional and singular work of the past, or rather as a living piece, still attracting other artists’ imagination? The dialogue with Diego Velázquez’s work, conducted by most acclaimed artists, gives it a unique historical continuity and opens a space for interpretations; its continuing mesmerising attractiveness for the artists captivates their imagination and tempts them to set off on artistic and aesthetic quests.⁴ I am fully convinced that Velázquez’s painting will remain inspiring and will never lose its artistic value for future generations, even when you compare it with other masterpieces. *Las Meninas* is like an emblem of the art world, and that is why artists are so hypnotised by it and feel they are compelled to return to it and abandon themselves to its charm.

Las Meninas is in no sense a conventional picture It [is] ... concerned with nothing less than the role vision plays in human self-definition. The picture induces a kind of accentuation of consciousness by summoning the observer’s eye to exert itself in responsive action and intensified multiple acts of perception.⁵

My interest in this topic originated from my long-term fascination not only with Velázquez’s painting, but with its impact on other artists, especially since the 20th century. My approach could be described as deliberations set in a labyrinth which endlessly continues to trap the mind of the interpreter reading the historical work but sometimes, due to its influence, adding new elements to his/her own imaginary world. It is my intention to look into the recurrence – in the new ver-

² M. Foucault, *The Order of Things. An archaeology of the human sciences*, Routledge, Taylor and Francis e-Library, London and New York 2005 and L. Steinberg, *Velázquez’ „Las Meninas”*, JSTOR, in: “October”, MIT Press. Vol. 19 (Winter, 1981), pp. 52-53: <http://faculty.winthrop.edu/stockk/SELF%20PORTRAIT/Steinberg,%20Las%20Meninas.pdf>

³ The website containing some artworks alluding to *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez: “Artble”, http://www.artble.com/artists/diego_velazquez/paintings/las_meninas

⁴ M. Kahr, “Velázquez and Las Meninas”, *Art Bulletin*, 57/2, June 1975, pp. 225-246.

⁵ L. Steinberg, Velázquez’ “Las Meninas”... p. 52.

sions – of some characteristic themes. *Las Meninas* plays an important role in the history of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde aesthetic revolutions, which in the course of time affected the understanding of art forms, spaces, and colours. The masterpiece in the Museo del Prado remains unchanged, but it provides still new inspirations and allusions for new generations of artists.⁶ The painting can give rise to refined interpretations, but also to rebellious and/or ironic approaches, either subverting its aesthetics and its conventional readings, or concentrated on the personal experiences of its unrivalled beauty.

In consequence of my passion for tracing *Las Meninas* in a variety of venues and situations either in physical reality or while browsing the Internet, I have studied many artworks influenced by it, starting from the print by Francisco Goya (1778), up until today, when one can see hundreds, if not thousands, of its versions. Furthermore, being so deeply charmed by Velázquez's painting, some time ago I made a personal pilgrimage to Madrid. The juxtaposition of the aesthetic experience of the piece in its physical space and its hyper-detailed HD graphic digital representation was a great challenge for me.⁷ I was happy to encounter the masterpiece "face to face", but on the other hand, it is great to be able to look at it from unconventional perspectives that would not be possible while visiting the Museo del Prado. Later on, I reflected on the widespread appreciation of this masterpiece throughout the centuries, and its unprecedented power to inspire many artists and philosophers; I think that this paper may serve as a good exemplification of this phenomenon.

The artistic allusions to *Las Meninas* discussed below are of different character. But my general hypothesis is that the works that involve only a play with its artistic form should be seen as devoid of meaning, and as such, imperfect, bringing aesthetic dissatisfaction. Formal allusions will always lose in comparison with the awesome original. It is the ones evidencing a deeper analysis of the concepts behind the visible representation and carrying an important message for the spectators of their time that can live their own aesthetic lives and preserve their own identities with respect to *Las Meninas*. Such works, conveying the ideas paramount for the recipients, make us aware of the changing historical circumstances and ready to make new and unpredictable readings rooted in different historical experiences. Velázquez's work is perfect and complete, but its meaning for successive generations may evolve, and can therefore be studied anew and re-interpreted.

⁶ L. Cocchiarella, "When Image sets Reality. Perspectival alchemy in Velázquez's *Las Meninas*", in: *KoG Scientific*, No. 19/2015, pp. 65-83: <https://www.google.pl/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=0ahUKEwjnfD5vtnVAhWBSRoKHeFxDgkQFggqMAA&url=http%3A%2F%2Fhrcaak.srce.hr%2Ffile%2F222632&usq=AFQjCNHPzgrEoRkKZIBgYJ-jnRj0Navwn5g>

⁷ *Las Meninas* on the website of the Museum of Prado, picture scan in HD: <https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/las-meninas/9fdc7800-9ade-48b0-ab8b-edee94ea877f>

Researchers in the field have defined some of the most important themes in the history of canvas painting.⁸ One of them, which has attracted close attention of art historians, is the figure of Margaret Theresa, the princess prematurely deceased in childbirth at 22. This member of the Habsburg royal family impressed the imagination of the posterity due to her unusual representation as an epitome of a future ruler, the source of responsibility, but also secret control. The image of the Princess, surrounded by her courtiers in the royal art gallery located in the now demolished part of the Royal Palace hosting Velázquez's atelier (Cuarto del Principe)⁹, conveys the social significations broader than its apparent aesthetic representation as a portrait: the sense of royal power and rule, but also loneliness, the burden of authority and historic responsibility. They could be perceived in the Infanta's pondering but playful expression, as she is seemingly unaware of the real meaning of the scene in which she appears. Another point of interest is the Royal Chamberlain Don José Nieto Velázquez, one of the central figures of the painting, who can be seen in the doorway to the Princess's room. He seems to be an ambivalent character, as his devotion to the royal family was in doubt due to the arising suspicions about his hidden intents, perhaps spying, which could be implied here by his position near the two royal rooms. Among the other characters arousing curiosity are the two guardians in the background, attentively watching the scene: Infanta's chaperone Marcela de Ulloa and a bodyguard (probably Diego Ruiz de Azcon). The other historical figures are the Infanta's ladies-in-waiting Maria Agustina Sarmiento and Isabela de Velasco. Additionally, the focal spots at the bottom right include the figures of two midgets, i.e. the achondroplastic German, Maribarbola (Maria Barbola), and the Italian Nicolas Pertusato, the devoted companions of the Princess's childhood.¹⁰ There is also a large sleepy

⁸ J. Searle, "Las Meninas" and the Paradoxes of Pictorial Representation, in: *Critical Inquiry* 6 (3), The University of Chicago Press, 1980, pp. 477-488 and one of the many films about *Las Meninas*: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WKRKRpz09Fk>

⁹ S. Dunin-Wilczyński, „Artysta wpisany w dzieło. Między *Las Meninas* Diego Velazqueza a *New Nightmare* Wesa Cravena”, in: *Zeszyty Naukowe KUL* 57 (2014), nr 3 (227), p. 5: https://www.kul.pl/files/102/articles/2014_3/zn_kul_2014_3_stanislaw_dunin-wilczynski.pdf

¹⁰ A good example which underscores the meaning of the Infanta's age is a piece by the collaborating artists Equipo Crónica (Rafaela Solbes) and Manolo Valdésa entitled *Las Meninas la salita*, showing the princess in her room in private. This an oil painting of 70 x70 cm, which shows a child's room from the 1970s. You can see there some characteristic objects such as an inflatable duck for a swimming pool or a ball. This is to remind the spectator that the princess is an ordinary girl of the age of five who is surely not interested in aesthetics nor her future political challenges. She discards all political intrigues, men's high ideals and their plots. From the point of view of a common man this seems more realistic than Velázquez's work. The scene where the little girl is playing with her toys in her room is more attractive than the one showing the girl of five as a ruler standing in the royal room. The modern representation shows a scene which could take place in any household, because the royal successor's child-like nature cannot be changed and detract her from home-like family atmosphere. Obviously, this painting refers to the original work, and the message inherent in it, though only implied there. In Velázquez's portrayal it is the princess who dominates the composition; in *Las Meninas la salita* it is a child at play who is more important.

dog in the right corner. Master Velázquez is seen painting the royal couple – Phillip IV and Mariana of Austria, who are only visible as a reflection in the mirror.¹¹ The painter standing in front of his canvas is seen as dominating all of the elements of the royal room. In the later renditions this is a frequently highlighted feature.

Artistic "travels in time" – history and interpretations

Throughout history dozens, if not hundreds, of versions of *Las Meninas* were created. For the purposes of this paper I have chosen to discuss the works (created after 1957) of such artists as Salvador Dali (1960), Tadeusz Kantor (1965), Rafael Solbes and Manolo Valdés (1970), Cristóbal Toral (1975), Joel Peter Witkin (1987), Sophie Matisse (2001), Shinji Ogawa (2002), Greg Tatum (2005), Lluís Barba (2007) and Gerard Rancinan (2009). My story of the life of the masterpiece throughout centuries could begin from the description of my predilection for (or I might even say obsession with) Picasso's versions of *Las Meninas*, which he began to create in 1957. Among the 58 of his paintings which Picasso donated to the museum under his patronage in Barcelona as many as 45 pieces were related in some way to *Las Meninas*. Picasso's transformations of the themes from this painting are characteristic for avant-garde artistic experiments. They attempt *inter alia* to explore a variety of possible perspectives, including imaginary ones, in order to enable the viewer to gain unique aesthetic experience and insight due to the exceptional aesthetic features of the painting.¹² As the artist was able to employ Cubist geometry, specifically by breaking up the shapes common in the natural world and then remodelling them in line with his ideas, it was possible for him to focus on the relevant features by rejecting elements of the painting which were redundant, useless and of poor aesthetic quality. Picasso's most renowned piece alluding to *Las Meninas* is a monochrome greyish large-format painting (194 x 260 mm), where Velázquez's "orderly composed narrative" was replaced by the composition of contrasts between white and black values. While Velázquez's painting created in 1656 reflects on the family scene in the palace's calm room, Picasso's version is truly dynamic, if not disorganised. In his picture everything is seemingly carefully located, but the contrasts and light in the upper part of the room strive to divert the viewer's attention, undermining the desired concentration on the aesthetic values of the work. Velázquez's image resembles a posed photo, but Picasso's work evokes chaos destroying a cosy family atmosphere.

¹¹ Z. Ambrożewicz, *Widzialność niewidzialnego. Las Meninas Diega Velázqueza*, in: „Przegląd Filozoficzny – Nowa Seria”, R. 22: 2013, Nr 1 (85): http://pf.czasopisma.pan.pl/images/data/pf/wydania/No_1_2013/6.pdf

¹² H. Bizri, A. Johnson, Ch. Vasilakis, *Las Meninas in VR: Storytelling and the Illusion in Art*, Electronic Visualization Laboratory University of Illinois at Chicago: https://www.evl.uic.edu/aej/papers/meninas_paris.pdf, and 3D film about *Las Meninas* with reference to the version by Picasso: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_B91T6bomh4

Velázquez's love of accuracy in revealing details can evoke the mood of persistence and dignity prevailing at the real moment, as contrasted with apparent chaos in Picasso's work. The latter is also widely known for the employed avant-garde painting technique, leading to new experiments with colours and perspective enriched by abstract components. But my point, perhaps somewhat risky, is that except for its appreciated vanguard painting technique, Picasso's representation lacks a deep message, i.e. it could be interpreted as a vanguard manifesto, where Velázquez's work is used as material for re-modelling. Ultimately, Picasso's interpretation relies too much on the original and does not contribute to the formulation of new ideas, therefore it has not become unobjectionably independent from its model to constitute an original work. I would be inclined to maintain that it is rather an attempt to challenge the Grand Master's technique, whose outcome seems somewhat doubtful due to Picasso's neglect of the content layer of the artwork which could allow for its deeper and autonomous interpretation, even though it apparently shows a dramatically different representation.

In 1950 Picasso referred to Velázquez's work and his variations of the theme as follows:

If someone wanted to copy *Las Meninas*, entirely in good faith, for example, upon reaching a certain point and if that one was me, I would say... what if you put them a little more to the right or left? I'll try to do it my way, forgetting about Velázquez. The test would surely bring me to modify or change the light because of having changed the position of a character. So, little by little, that would be a detestable *Meninas* for a traditional painter, but would be my *Meninas*.¹³

Comparing *Las Meninas* by Velázquez with Picasso's vision, one has an impression that Velázquez's painting is artistically complete and rounded off, which has been verified throughout its reception in history. Thus, in general it may be concluded that any artistic (and specifically painterly) attempts, formally innovative, but not contributing new ideas and meanings, would be only ancillary to the original work. Confrontation with Velázquez's achievements may seem as if a novice contested his Master who cannot be defeated in his field. Although I admire Picasso's paintings, I could hardly agree that the Cubist *Las Meninas* conveys a deeper message than its Baroque prototype. It is also worth mentioning that Picasso painted several colour versions of *Las Meninas*, but it seems that his later works also evidence the fact that his continuous attempts to do better than Velázquez have no real hope of success.

¹³ The website dedicated to Pablo Picasso: <http://www.pablocicasso.org/las-Meninas.jsp>

Another attempt invoking the motifs inherent in Velázquez's Baroque painting which attracted my curiosity is a group of four representations that can be jointly discussed, though they evidently reveal stylistic and ideological differences. The works are unquestionably traditional and do not employ specific avant-garde techniques, but they convey meaningful and conceptualised messages allowing them to refine their relations with the original while preserving their own aesthetic identity. All of the said works use unique perspectives, as they are meant to immortalise the visible changes to the setting of Velázquez's scene throughout history. Let us start with the painting *D'après Las Meninas* (1975) by Cristóbal Toral, who rendered the famous royal chamber as viewed after many years. There are dozens of suitcases and packages covered by dust. They may be interpreted as metaphorical assets accumulated over centuries – historical narratives, memorised events of the past, changing the course of history which left its traces in this royal room; also some furnishings which were brought there in particular periods of time, or sometimes taken away. Cristóbal Toral has quoted the painter's canvas as an object from Master Velázquez's work: it is apparently intact despite the historical perturbations due to the changing ideologies over centuries. The figure of the Royal Chamberlain Don José Nieto Velázquez is also preserved, but nowadays he seems to be rather a guardian of the abandoned luggage, as the people under his care died a long time ago. The painting's dark colours, like the dust-covered packages, arouse the sensation of the passing of time for the viewer who is obviously immersed in the current reality.

The next image under investigation is the painting by Sophie Matisse (2001), which shares similar interpretation of a completely empty room: all of the former furnishings are gone (old stuff is useless today), and the door where the Chancellor was standing are now unguarded and open. The colours have become subdued as in Toral's work, but although the room seems well-kept, it is not important for anybody; it lacks its inner spirit of life which, despite the apparent lapse of time, can be still sensed in the painting. This forgotten space may be likened to the entirely disinterested – perhaps interrupted for a while – visits to the room implied by Toral's representation, showing a journey through time where unpacked cases are left carelessly, hinting at no hope to serve their purpose at home. These *signum memoriae* of the past apparently play the role of the artist's subjective interpretations. In turn, Matisse's painting advances the expectations of a cleaning person who would arrive to treat it as a simple contemporary hotel room, showing his/her indifference to the aesthetic functions of the royal room of historical importance.

The third painting belonging to this group is a medium-sized oil canvas by Shinji Ogawa, in the collection of The National Museum of Art in Osaka. The artist has intentionally repeated the arrangement of the figures in Velázquez's original; however he has removed the Infanta. This absurdity allows the viewer to experience the calmness and timelessness of the composition, but also the sense

of its missing component. As opposed to the images mentioned above, which told some stories, this painting shows motionless figures standing as if in an interrupted scene. This image, looking like a still frame, evokes the atmosphere of unbearable tension, anticipation for anybody who could take the acting role and fulfil their mission, deserving tribute and appraisal as they are starring in their own performance. In fact, the Infanta could be replaced by any person wishing to act in this role. This does not necessarily mean that the painter had in mind a specific character of royal blood, but it is possible that the composition was to symbolise the persistence of the system of hierarchical power, allowing everybody to play their role in the greater order to contribute to the maintenance of the system. In this motionless and dramatic scene one may sense some vague feeling of waiting for somebody to deal with this awkward situation. The deprivation of the meaning of life may be experienced as a more severe suffering than any sadness caused by misfortunes; people need a purposeful and meaningful life to avoid apathy, loneliness and/or lethargy.

The last piece belonging to the group mentioned above that I wish to reflect on is the digital artwork by Greg Tatum (2006), where the representation of the Infanta seems to be an allegory of the mechanisms of power. Here, Margaret Theresa is an electro-magnetic puppet wired to a power supply unit by power cables visible under her garments. She seems to be a robot, which is a symbol of the political pressure on the Infanta. She is rendered in white and grey, deprived of natural expression. Next to her is a man in a modern outfit (the author figure), who seems to be showing ostentatious disrespect to her. The guard in the doorway stands as if keeping an eye on everything, namely the political order in which the Infanta-robot plays an important role as a woman who is formally on the top of the pyramid of power, but, in fact, under full control. The artist has used a cold colour scheme to show the room resembling an abandoned hangar with its ceiling lit by two hanging lamps. The canvas invoking the author of the composition, placed in the same spot as in Velázquez's painting, can remind us about the old story which is subconsciously replayed anew.

All of the four artworks I have examined above do not rely so much on their creative aesthetic form, as primarily on their conceptual and meaningful content owing to which one can experience their unique artistic identity. This applies especially to the last work which is a good example supporting my argument. All of them focus on the setting (the royal room) of the original scene. This approach aims to create a narrative about the passing of time by reference to the royal chamber, which conveys the idea of the heart of Europe of the 17th century. All of the artists strive to show the passage of history and time, but Tatum's artwork has another layer of meaning which is relevant for people across the world and across cultures. It is related to and inspired by Velázquez's painting, but it clearly shows its own identity. Its substantial value lies in revealing an intrinsic mechanism of power to control its puppets for political purposes; this observation makes it

a creative interpretation of the original due to its reflection on a universal phenomenon rather than to its historical dimension. For the viewer the novelty of the artistic techniques employed in the above artworks is less important, as they more or less closely follow the original; it is rather their content which renders them creative.

Apparently different and enthralling features could be attributed to the next three artworks I wish to discuss. The first of them is Joel Peter Witkin's photographic collage, *Las Meninas. Self-Portrait after Velázquez* (1987). It shows a darkened room with the infant princess in the centre. She is legless, supported by a mobile scaffolding attached to her dress.¹⁴ Her eyes are hidden behind a transparent scarf, she is holding a rope to keep control over the dog.

The photographer, although he kept as the leading figure Infanta Margarita, gave her a new appearance, that of a woman who has lost her nether limbs and whose body is reduced to the upper part of her trunk. Thus, she appears standing on a metallic framework reminiscent of the girl's dress in the original painting. Her company consists of a dog lying in front of her feet, of a masculine figure, of a hybrid that recalls the figures of Picasso's *Guernica* and of a mechanic automat. Velázquez has also been replaced by the photographer, the courtier standing by the door by the figure of Christ, where as in the initial composition, the king and the queen are reflected in the mirror.¹⁵

In Witkin's interpretation, the Infanta is an intrinsic element of the picture as a royal, however one who is seemingly ruling over an imaginary kingdom and is an unwilling embodiment of the shared ideas about the Habsburg Royal Family prevailing in Europe. The portrayed infanta is a person who is fully aware of her misfortunes due to her too early experience of power turning her praiseworthy intentions of just and wise rule into suffering from emotional abuse. This could be ascribed to her mode of existence which is, unfortunately, reduced to constant discomfort from the outer stimuli bringing her undesired outcomes due to the conventions of the outer expression of power, limiting her visible royal attributes, and proclaiming only the impression of domination instead.

The themes under scrutiny in this artwork range from the religious motifs invoked by the Christ-like figure at the door alluding to the Chamberlain, to imaginary creatures typical for nightmares, waiting in silence alongside the Infanta for further orders to carry out. The overall impression evoked by this monochrome photo is open to different aesthetic judgments. One can also interpret it as

¹⁴ G. Celant, *Witkin Joel-Peter*, Thames & Hudson, London 1995, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ E. Papadopoulou, *Provoking the spectator. Las Meninas* by Joel Peter Witkin, in: "InterArtive - a platform for contemporary art and thought", 10/2008: <http://interartive.org/2008/10/Meninas/>

a show of unchanging power and its tough rule. Both Witkin, here channelling the original painter, and Margaret Habsburg, take appropriate positions to arouse relevant aesthetic experience. The role of the artist is to disclose the philosophical meanings related to the represented power, but the Princess seems to embody its nature in a clear and determined manner.

This work can prompt the viewer to ponder on the essence of power, a phenomenon worthy of close examination. The original work by Velázquez also implies this idea, however it is neither so visible, nor of such primary importance. The photo collage by Witkin may be acknowledged as a creative and not imitative interpretation of its source of inspiration owing to its distinctive artistic techniques, as well as its content. It can be perceived as an artwork with its own identity, unique and different from *Las Meninas*. It may serve as a good example of a work inspired by an old masterpiece, which, however, owing to the innovative features of its content need no longer rely on the original.

Another one of the three representations I have mentioned is *Las Meninas* after Velázquez, part of the series alluding to similar ideological content, namely, a photo by Lluís Barba (2007) which gives me an ambivalent feeling. On the one hand I appreciate the artist's intention to give artistic importance to the new characters who were absent in *Las Meninas*, i.e. the two tourists accidentally stopping at the museum to take some photos without caring for the deeper value of the artworks they are passing by. The original, which serves as a background for them, is kept in black and white, so that the contrast between the tourists, appearing against this background in modern colourful outfits, and the portrayed historical characters is striking. Those two said tourists may belong to the category of modern museum visitors who race along the exhibited works. The artist has pasted these figures into the space of the work and has shown them among the noblemen. In fact, I had also imagined myself immersed in the three-dimensional space of the painting. On the other hand, this work sparks the sense of an indecorous treatment of Velázquez's masterpiece due to the use of the techniques borrowed from advertising and pop-culture art. But its strong impact enhancing the aesthetic experience in such a situation seems thought-provoking. It derives from the interaction at the conceptual level of the photo: the presence of the tourists looking at the painting attracts the viewer's attention to the photo. The scene captured in this image is ostensibly devoid of any specific allusions to the content of *Las Meninas*, therefore the "sacred" value of the masterpiece has been intentionally eradicated due to the suggestion of indifference and/or missing knowledge and aesthetic sensitivity among the recipients. The aesthetic quality of Barba's photo is built on the double perception of the historical moment and modern perspective. The artist did not intend to show the majesty of the royals or interact with the 17th century masterpiece, but to show it as simply belonging to the modern realm of the consumption of art characterised by irreverent and happy-go-lucky attitudes to the work of art. This phenomenon could emerge from simple curiosity or the limited time for the visitors to "tick off" the masterpieces on

their “shopping list” and their later appropriation by means of a “selfie” or other photographic forms to share them, e.g. on the social media on the web. Simply, people do not always (if ever) like to deliberate on in-depth interpretations of artworks and their artistic and historical contexts, but the artist certainly wishes to illustrate the broader issue of the emerging new conventions of viewing art typical for a *flâneur* who is only interested in wandering around, gazing light-heartedly at the works and not necessarily engaging in their deep analysis. I believe that the primary point of Barba’s work is his attitude to the historical dimension of *Las Meninas*; to avoid neglecting anything of its historical importance intrinsic in this monumental painting created ca. 300 years ago we should realise that the analyses of its aesthetic value do not seem necessary. However, this stance is not meant to support the concepts of relativism and subjectivism in the perception of art, but to make us aware of the need to accept a variety of ways of upholding our relations with art regardless of the viewer’s aesthetic knowledge. In my opinion, such knowledge contributes to revealing art’s objective meanings and values as well as shaping our ability to deeply appreciate aesthetic qualities and/or art criticism.

The third photo-collage image to be mentioned here is Gerard Rancinan’s *The Maids of Honor* (2009), with a modern burlesque-like character resembling Marilyn Monroe wearing a necklace with a dollar sign and a tattoo on her forearm acting as the Infanta. The other figures resemble the celebrities from the world of modern fashion and pop-culture. A soubrette wearing a pink latex suit bends her knee showing off her high heels, which departs from the Baroque image. Another lady in waiting is shown in a low-cut evening gown made of newspapers and journals and sports a hair-do like a long-haired blond model. The midgets have put on similar clothes, but the female midget mockingly pulls down the skin on her cheeks and the male midget is holding a leash with a large muzzle. In the open plush-sided doorway where we could formerly see the bodyguard, there are now the biblical Adam and Eve, but this time stylised for a pop culture couple. The royal female caretaker resembles a nun, and Master Velázquez has turned into a photographer tattooed all over his body including his bald head. The framed canvas has remained in its historical place, however the “fragile” marking and the inscription beneath informing us about the place of the work’s execution – the artist’s studio in Los Angeles – are also visible. The author has maintained the historical and artistic connection between the artworks by repeating an element from Velázquez’s original: the reflection in the mirror, though in Rancinan’s collage its background has been replaced. The whole work is like an ad for pop-culture lifestyle. Rancinan intends to show the essence of the court life in different times and from modern perspective, where e.g. gaming, fashion, wealth, and satisfying one’s whims rise in importance. His work can be unambiguously interpreted as it displays “strong and unquestionable” aesthetic values and power of expression. Owing to its conceptual content, this representation maintains its own identity, and its creativeness may contribute to its success as an appreciated work of art.

As opposed to the artworks analysed above, Salvador Dali's version of *Las Meninas* from the Museo del Prado, his painting titled *The Maids-in-Waiting* (1960), cannot be separated from its links to the original. It is composed of numbers which represent the elements of the court scene. So, number seven stands for the painter's canvas, the Master, and the Chancellor, as a symbol of sensitivity, eccentricity, and dynamism, as well as deep spirituality. Numbers four and five denote the ladies-in-waiting, because they symbolise logical thinking, persistence, willingness to learn, resistance to stress, and openness. Numbers six and nine standing for the female caretaker and the male bodyguard in Dali's painting characterise kinship relationships, creativity, emotions and sensitivity. The female midget (number three) is associated with the idea of striving for personal development, gifts, entrepreneurship and creativity, as well as relying on someone else's advice hidden before the public. Number two stands for the dog as it symbolizes balance and openness to others, and also sensitivity and emotionality. Number one indicating the male midget represents leadership and individuality alongside willingness to appear in public. Finally number eight standing for Margaret Theresa, symbolizes creative action, intuitiveness, but also strong will and determination. *The Maids-in-Waiting* is an outstanding artistic achievement, expressing similar ideas as its prototype. The form of Dali's work, surprising at first glance, perfectly fits the aesthetic qualities of Velázquez's masterpiece in terms of the continuation and exploration of the intended meanings intrinsic in the 17th century painting. Dali's numerological approach is significant and unambiguous as it is an excellent transcription of the traditional aesthetic ideas into abstract form. However, it needs to be underscored that its aesthetic reception is conditioned by its original antecedent, and its conceptual content develops Velázquez's message, but practically does not contribute to the broadening of our knowledge. Dali's painting has an original and novel form, but it should be noted that it strongly relies on the old masterpiece. Dali's philosophical ideas are inherent in Velázquez's artwork, and his numerological interpretation is built on the narrative of its characters. The outstanding Surrealist work is unable to stand alone as a separate aesthetic entity detached from its artistic predecessor, and it can only be treated as its historical supplement.

Before concluding my analysis it is worth noting two major works by Tadeusz Kantor. One of them is an installation from 1965, which is in fact a diptych joined by the hinges attached to the edges of two wooden boards. The upper part displays a sketched portrait of the Infanta, and underneath two joint wooden elements compose her royal gown. The bottom part displays an old, worn up canvas schoolbag. This foldable piece is intended to contain its components like a bag, thus connoting a journey. For some viewers the Infanta is an unforgettable icon, she is constantly invisibly present in their minds, she is with them when they set out on a journey. She belongs to the intellectual and artistic historical "package" which has a considerable impact on our journey through life. Kantor's artwork, striving to tell us a story about our experience of painful commemoration

of the past may be meant to counter-act the pressure of the power of the original work. The folding-up diptych may symbolically epitomise a forgotten moment of history.

The second of the two works mentioned above is an acrylic painting of 146 x 128 cm entitled *Pewnego wieczoru weszła do mojego pokoju infantka Velasquez'a (po raz drugi)* [One evening the Infanta by Velasquez entered my room for the second time] (1990). Kantor's piece, created 25 years after his installation, implies a reconciliation and dialogue to establish the terms of agreement with the masterpiece. Margaret Theresa appears in one of her many portraits after many years, but one can claim that this time the artist did not attempt to unconsciously appropriate her historical image, as she seemingly entered Kantor's studio to offer her image at her free will. This time she has an entirely different appearance from that in the picture painted nearly 400 years earlier. Kantor did not intend to render the court life, he was rather interested in his dialogue with the Master in the form of a different depiction. This could be regarded as a citation from the artist, where imitation has been replaced by a version true to its historical time and artistic conventions.

The first work of the two is clearly original and unique, even though the allusion to the portrayal of the Infant is easily discernible. Kantor's work abandons his personal contexts, implying his belief that for many it is inconceivable to remove *Las Meninas* from their aesthetic experience, and this painting repeatedly returns as their obsession. However, the autonomy of his work is fairly limited due to the fact that the artist's message is focused on the image rather than any contexts which could help its interpretation. The second work discussed here seems to be an epilogue, a final stage in Kantor's artistic journey through time, a point to reach, which allows one to enjoy the kind of peaceful experience which comes from the presence of the Infant. It will be only then that this historical painting would exude calm and the feeling of reliability due to its appropriate assessment of the values of the original and the due appraisal of its creator.

Back to the starting point: the story of the Infanta and her many portraits

The widely acclaimed painting from the Museum of Prado is still an artistic challenge for successive generations of artists, because of its thought-provoking content, perfectly realised form, and the visible touch of Velázquez's genius. This challenge triggers a creative process in many artists which results in a variety of re-makings and re-interpretations of the original. Some of them are only supplements to the masterpiece, in the case of others, the artists made an effort to create original and unique artworks without losing their artistic roots. It is my belief that any takes on the original which are only limited to its formal aspect, and neglect its conceptual dimension, e.g. the print by Francisco Goya (1778), the painting by Salvador Dali (1960) or Howard Podeswa's *The Walkers* - after *Las Meninas* (2005), consequently become subsidiary to the original, losing the

chance to stand out in the history of art. In contrast to them, the artworks displaying both innovative artistic techniques, like those from the beginning of the 20th century, and highly elaborated conceptual re-interpretation, have the best chance to achieve aesthetic autonomy, as in the case of the works by Joel Peter Witkin (1987), Greg Tatum (2006), and/or Kantor's installation (1965). The development of art and our historical tradition allows us to take a new look at past artistic achievements and their historical contexts, which is reflected e.g. in the (hi)story of *Las Meninas*. Even if this outstanding painting were lost in the Museum of Prado, it would continue its life in hundreds of its later transformations, while still preserving its position as an unattainable ideal.

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LAS MENINAS – NARRACJA PRZEZ WIEKI (streszczenie)

Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie interpretacji kilku XX i XXI wiecznych prac artystycznych, nawiązujących do słynnego obrazu *Las Meninas* Diego Velázqueza. W analizie skupiono się na potencjale warsztatu artystycznego, biorąc pod uwagę jego awangardową i neoawangardową zmienność oraz głębokość konceptualizacji. Z analizy płynie wniosek, że prace, które posiadają niewielki wymiar konceptualny, pozostają jedynie nawiązaniem historycznym, nie zyskując samodzielności w świecie sztuki, pozostając w silnym, determinującym je związku z barokowym pierwowzorem. Z kolei prace, które zostały głęboko skonceptualizowane, zawierające sens i znaczenie wynikające z inspiracji *Las Meninas*, takie, które intencjonalnie wykraczają poza pierwowzór, mogą być łatwiej potraktowane jako niezależne dzieła, które mogłyby nawet powstać w podobnej postaci niezależnie od historycznego oryginału. Prace wybrano do analizy uwzględniając ich cechy warsztatowe oraz potencjał interpretacyjny, co miało być głównym wyznacznikiem ich autonomiczności.

Słowa kluczowe: inspiracja, interpretacja, forma, konceptualizm, transformacja.