

Baroque in Spain: Velázquez

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the Baroque in Spain, focusing on the artist Diego Velázquez. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, explain the work of Velázquez as court painter for Philip IV of Spain, and explain the narrative complexity of "Las Meninas"—"The Maids of Honor"—and the relationship that this work establishes with the person viewing the painting. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:

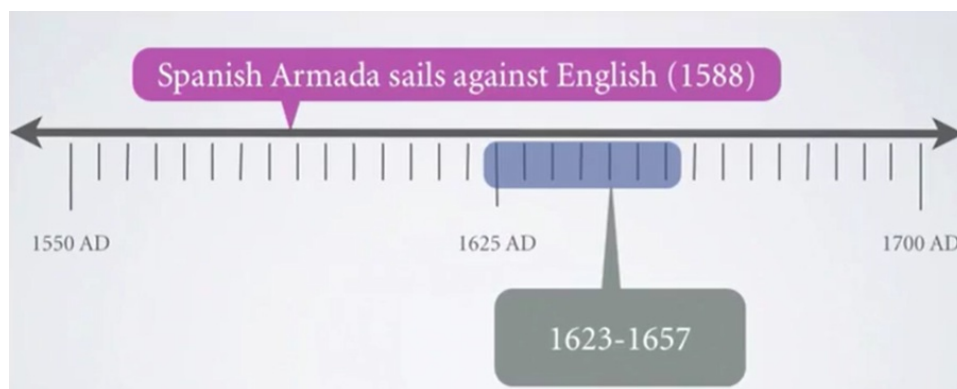


BIG IDEA

Diego Velázquez was the most important Baroque painter of 17th-century Spain.

1. Period and Location: The Baroque in Spain

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from the 17th century, between 1623 and 1657, but the lesson will be referring to 16th-century Spain as well. Both centuries are commonly referred to as the Golden Age in Spain. Today's artwork focuses geographically on Madrid, Spain.



2. 16th- and 17th-Century Spain: Historical Context

The 16th and 17th centuries in Spain are commonly referred to as the Golden Age in Spain. The spread of Spanish influence throughout Europe, and Spain's colonization of the New World, peaked during this 200-year span. It ended with the gradual loss of Spain's prominent position in the world, due to fighting with other countries in Europe and unrest within its colonies. In a sense, Spain had globally spread itself a bit too thin.

The chart below outlines some of the major events affecting Spain during this period.



3. Diego Velázquez

Diego Velázquez, shown below in his self-portrait, grew up and emerged as an artist in Seville, Spain, during the early part of the 17th century. Although he learned his craft in Seville, he lived out the majority of his life in Madrid as royal court painter and curator for Philip IV of Spain. He's universally considered to be the most important Spanish Baroque painter of the 17th century, known particularly for his portrait painting.



Self-portrait by Diego Velázquez

1650

Oil on canvas

4. The Artwork of Diego Velázquez

4a. “The Water Carrier of Seville”

“The Water Carrier of Seville” is one of his earliest works of renown. He completed it around the age of 20, and it shows his remarkable talent already as a painter. It also shows the influence of Italian Baroque artists such as Caravaggio, with respect to his application of contrasting light and dark elements and use of a single light source.



The Water Carrier of Seville by Diego Velázquez

1619

Oil on canvas

His ability to capture detail was also notable. The appearance of the clay jars, for example, is incredibly realistic. Velázquez clearly had a developed understanding of the effects of light, even at an early age. Notice how the muted reflection on the jars creates the illusion of a matte finish to the clay. Velázquez also includes wonderful little details, such as the streaks of water and droplets on the jars, that add a sense of realism to this painting.

4b. “King Philip IV of Spain”

Velázquez’s skill came to the attention of King Philip IV of Spain, who hired him to work for the court as a painter and portraitist. This next piece was commissioned by the King during an onsite visit during a Spanish military campaign.



King Philip IV of Spain by Diego Velázquez

1644

Oil on canvas

Velázquez makes the very best of what he has to work with, as the figure of Philip IV wasn't very imposing. His large lower jaw, which is courtesy of **Habsburg** genetics, made for a rather unimpressive figure. Therefore, Velázquez compensates for these physical limitations by focusing on the clothing of the King. His clothes are magnificently rendered down to the incredibly detailed silver stitching that runs throughout the outfit.



HINT

The attention to material textures had, by this time, become a hallmark of Northern European painters. Velázquez shows his ability is at the very least on par with the Northern European masters.



DID YOU KNOW

What makes this image even more impressive is that this was an outfit the King actually wore while reviewing his troops. Artists were often given elaborate articles of clothing that they would then superimpose on their subjects. Velázquez's use of clothing that would have been familiar creates a more visceral image.



TERM TO KNOW

Habsburg

One of the most important ruling families in Europe, originally from the Holy Roman Empire.

4c. “Las Meninas”

Velázquez’s masterpiece, “Las Meninas,” or “The Maids of Honor,” is a monumental painting in terms of Velázquez’s vision for it, as well as the overall size. It’s enormous, with dimensions of approximately 11 x 9 feet. He completed this after a visit to Italy—one of the few times he left his homeland of Spain. The painting is considered to be Velázquez’s attempt to elevate his own stature as an artist as well as that of his craft.

In this piece, he created a visually complex painting that can be appreciated on a number of different levels. At the center, illuminated, is the image of the little Princess Margarita being attended to by her maids-in-waiting. On the far right are her two favorite dwarfs, directly in front of the dog relaxing on the floor. The woman in the back, in the middle ground, who resembles a nun, is actually wearing widow’s clothes and is standing next to a younger man.

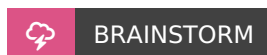


Las Meninas (also known as The Maids of Honor) by Diego Velázquez

1656-1657

Oil on canvas

The painting is a very realistic depiction of actual people. Everyone in the painting is identifiable as an actual person. Velázquez himself is a part of this painting, standing on the very left, painting an unseen image on a large canvas.



The fact of Velázquez placing himself here, in the midst of painting an unseen image, has led to an enormous amount of discussion as to the content of the painting. What might be the subject of this mystery painting? Is he painting an image of the princess and the scene that you see before you? Is it a portrait of the king and queen, seen in the mirror at the very back of the room? Is he painting the viewer? His depiction is reminiscent of Northern Baroque paintings of this time, such as the group portraits of Rembrandt that showed the subjects of the painting interacting with a viewer, by catching the viewer's eye as if he or she is a part of the work. Velázquez's use of light is also notable in this piece. The influence of Caravaggio is present, but the extremes in contrast are much more subdued, and instead replaced with a more natural variation of how the light dissipates throughout the room. Even his depiction of the mirror is realistic as he clearly distinguishes the mirror from the canvases around it. The use of the mirror recalls the use of a mirror by Jan van Eyck to extend beyond the frame of the canvas in his Arnolfini portrait.



DID YOU KNOW

There's also a nod to Northern masters in "Las Meninas" with Velázquez's inclusion of copies of two of Peter Paul Rubens' paintings on the wall, though they're very difficult to see in this image. This implies a great appreciation and respect for his Northern European contemporary. Regardless of the truth behind what is occurring in "Las Meninas," Velázquez's attempt to elevate his stature as an artist and that of his craft is superbly executed. In the same spirit as Vermeer's "Allegory of the Art of Painting," it's a celebration of the art of painting itself.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **the Baroque in Spain**, specifically the artist **Diego Velázquez**, who is considered to be the most important Baroque painter of 17th-century Spain. In addition to learning how to identify and define today's key terms, you also learned about the **historical context of 16th- and 17th-century Spain**. You examined the **artwork of Velázquez**, including the work that he completed as court painter for Philip IV of Spain. Lastly, you learned how to explain the narrative complexity of "Las Meninas," or "The Maids of Honor," and the relationship that this work establishes with the person viewing the painting.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



TERMS TO KNOW

Habsburg

One of the most important ruling families in Europe, originally from the Holy Roman Empire.