

# Diego Velázquez and John Singer Sargent: The Hidden Social Expectations in Female Portraits

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## ABSTRACT

Artistic representations always reflect the values and norms of the contemporary societies. This paper focuses on the genre of portrait paintings and its relationship to the misogynistic social historical context. This paper specifically discusses the Spanish court painter Diego Velázquez's portrait series of Princess Margarita Teresa, and the Italian-American painter John Singer Sargent's "Daughters of Edward Darley Boit." Through analyzing the visual components such as composition, proportion and lighting, the paper cross-examine the two artists' depictions of femininity. It can be concluded that these portraits' emphasis on innocence and virginity echo the expectations for females in the patriarchal, materialistic societies. The paper contributes to visual studies of Baroque and Realism artists.

**Keywords:** Baroque, Diego Velázquez, John Singer Sargent, Feminism, Image Analysis

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Since Renaissance Era, the Royal families and upper-class patrons had developed a habit of commissioning portraits to present an image of themselves—often beautified—to highlight their political, social and financial status[1]. One of the most renowned painters in the Baroque era is the Spanish painter Diego Velázquez, who created hundreds of portraits for the Spanish royal families and popes. Three hundred years after Velázquez came the Italian-American artist John Singer Sargent, who was also famous for commission portraits during the Gilded Age. Art historians have criticized both painters for representing the extravagance and materialism of their era. This paper explores how some of their best-known portraits for upper class young women further reflect the objectification of femininity through composition, perspectives and color. The two painters, despite being in different eras of history, share much in common both in their realistic treatment of the object, their temporal fame and honor, and the following criticism of superficiality and emptiness[4] by the later generations. The art movements and styles they belong to, and the societies they lived in are quite remote from one another, but juxtaposing them reveals the recurring social norms and sexist bias across centuries.

## 2. ANALYSIS

Velázquez was the chief court painter for Spanish Habsburg royal family, especially during the reign of Phillips IV, painting the monarch and his family members on multiple occasions. He created four portraits for the daughter of Phillips IV, princess Margarita Teresa during her childhood, ranging from age two to nine, including the

famous piece *Las Meninas*. In all these portraits, Margarita Teresa is dressed in luxurious garments and her composure could be characterized as courteous and innocent. She stands at the center of the composition, both hands stretched out to display her wide dress. This physical gesture constructs a symmetrical triangular frame. This triangular symmetry, a composition exploited by various Renaissance masters such as Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa* and *The Lady with An Ermine*, often conveys the sense of order and serenity. In addition, the child princess's short stature makes the triangular frame wider and more horizontal, further stabilizing the composition. The squarish frame highlights her identity as an innocuous and lovable child. In her later adulthood portraits by other artists, the growth in height stretches the composition vertically, which makes her appear more elegant and feminine yet also more authoritative and intimidating. Visually, she has lost her childhood innocence.



Figure 1. La infanta Margarita [Painting][8].



**Figure 2.** Retrato de la infanta Margarita [Painting] [9].



**Figure 3.** Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Blue Dress [Painting] [10].

Another factor in the early portraits stressing her childish nature is the placement of her eyes. In three portraits, Margarita Teresa is positioned in the lower half of the entire painting, and when being displayed to the viewer, her eyes will line on the same horizon as the viewer's. In her adulthood portraits, she often occupies the whole space, and her eyes are located in the upper half of the canvas. The elevation of eye position requires the viewer to physically look up to her, and therefore, both metaphorically and politically, expresses the authority of Margarita Teresa as the royal queen. Reversely, Velázquez allows the viewer to gaze at the princess at the equal height and even look down to her. For his very specific audience, the Austrian royal family[2], whom Phillips IV attempts to establish alliance with via marriage, the princess is presented in such way to highlight her submissiveness and thereby availability.



**Figure 4.** Infanta Margarita Teresa in a Pink Dress [Painting] [11].

Aside of the gesture and the composition, Velázquez skillfully crafted the princess's facial characteristics and the texture of her clothing to amplify her nobleness and charm while still remaining loyal to reality. All four portraits are full length and features three quarter views, a typical portrait perspective that shows complete facial features and a clear sense of volume. Margarita Teresa displays her full body while her well-lit face slightly turns to left. Her pale skin and blonde puffs of hair contrasts with the dark, obscure background.



**Figure 5.** Las Meninas [Painting] [12].

With these similarities in the subject, composition and gestures, the four portraits suggest an obvious link to each other. In other words, by observing and analyzing them together as a series or as a progression, the subtle variations imply profound transforming ideologies. These commonalities—central position, triangular -- Velázquez follows a certain guidelines or standard expectations when he was creating these portraits.

In 1879, John Singer Sargent went to Spain to study painting techniques of Velázquez and Frans Hals. He was heavily influenced by Velázquez's loose yet defining brushstrokes as well as his use of chiaroscuro, the high contrast between light and shade[6]. The renowned masterpiece Las Meninas and the series of portraits for Margarita Teresa, among the relatively few female portraits by Velázquez, provided guidelines to Sargent on depicting girls. His Daughters of Edward Darley Boit has the similar use of chiaroscuro and composition as Las Meninas.

Sargent manipulates composition, physical gesture and light effect to construct a hierarchy among the girls. He divides the canvas into three planes via vertical and horizontal lines and distributes the four girls into the three planes. The carpeted floor is in the lower half of the canvas and contains the youngest toddler, Julia. The wall on the left forms a vertical stripe that encompasses the second youngest child, Mary Louisa. The retreated dark rectangular space in the upper half of the canvas includes the eldest two daughters, Florence and Jane. Julia's plane extends a greater area than Mary Louisa's vertical zone; compared to her younger sibling, Maria Louisa is visually more constrained and limited. Meanwhile, although the upper half plane is about the similar size as the lower half, it contains two persons instead of one alone, thus appearing also less spacious and more tense. Sargent endows the

youngest Julia with most freedom to display herself by positioning her into the largest plane in the composition. As this group portrait is commonly regarded as an imitation of Velázquez's Las Meninas, making comparison and connections is reasonable. Las Meninas features a classical, isocephalistic aligning of main characters—meaning that the princess and the servant maids' feet are roughly on the same line—while Daughters of Edward Darley Boit distributes the four daughters to foreground, middle ground and background. Florence and Jane are at the farthest background space. Velázquez does depict other characters in background, and despite critics have analyzed this intricate setup that the king and the queen in the mirror are the actual sitters for the portrait in progress inside the painting[7], from a visual aspect they appear obscure and less noticeable compared to the princess and her maids in the foreground. Sargent may imply a parallel connection between the elder girls and the royal couple. Placing Florence and Jane in the far background weakens their significance[5] relative to their younger siblings in the foreground and middle ground.

While the particular portrait of the Boit girls is majorly based on Las Meninas, it also resembles the series of single portraits for Margarita Teresa: both presents a spectrum of underage femininity, varying from toddler to child to maiden. Similar to how the gradual elevation of eye location and stature in the portrait series develops a shift from innocence to maturity as the princess grows up, the physical gesture and eye location in the Boit girls portrait conveys different attributes to girls at different ages and further accentuates the hierarchical visual significance. Julia sits on the ground, her legs spread forward and her arms cling to a doll. Her puffy white pinafore dress stacks in the back, forming a squat triangular frame for her body. This echoes with the princess's two-year-old portrait, where her dress and her hand gesture construct a squarish, equilateral triangle outline. Julia's eyes are located at the lowest among all four girls. She may be the only one that allows the viewer to look at her at an equal height, or even look down to her. It implies the similar meekness and innocence nature of infant in the two-year old Margarita Teresa. When the viewers continue their visual journey upward, they would then focus on Maria Louisa, whose stature is more slender. She hides her arms behind her, and the defensive gesture conveys wariness and aloofness which are absent in Julia's depiction. The knee length pinafore provides a degree of width and immaturity nevertheless, making her overall impression fit to a seven-year old child. She is about the same age as the Spanish princess in her blue dress portrait, and both girls exhibit this intermediate transition from complete ignorant blissfulness to observant consciousness. And further up come Florence and Jane, their faces and bodies completely merged into shadow. Florence leans toward the vase in her profile view and holds up the arm facing toward the audience, making her appear thinner, more elusive and defensive. The mysterious attitudes correspond to Margarita Teresa in the pink dress, building a sense of authority and distance between the models and the viewers.

Velázquez and Sargent composed these portraits with different purposes: the series for the princess meant to be a propaganda of the Spanish royalty to appeal to the Austrian Habsburgs, while the Boit daughters was a personal gift for the painter's friend[5]. One is clearly tinted with a political intention; the other, although private, reveals to some degree the artist's own thought. The visual hierarchy reflects a social preference of different stages and characteristics of women. Although all women in these paintings are still underage and belong to the "youth" category, the visual placement suggest that the most adorable and the most significant is childlike innocence, and as women grow up and become more aware and independent, they are less favored. It is very possible that the two artists did not deliberately weave these implications and social criticism into their realistic portraits. Even so, the visual effects convey some long established value systems of their era that people had acquiesced naturally without reflecting upon. The adoration for childlike innocence may find a portion of its reasoning from the biological instinct, that juveniles are underdeveloped in strength and are less threatening. Yet praising the weakness is counterintuitive in the logic of evolution unless the weak party is hostile or useless. Such ranking is opposite from that for men. Both masters left few portraits of young boys, but in their extensive portraits of the Spanish monarch as well as many wealthy or reputable gentlemen, the emphasis on strength and authority[1] is ubiquitous. The men are depicted as tall, often wearing dark colored garments and appear lofty, serious and intimidating. This elevated stature and dark tone not only forms contrast with the portraits of the girls but also features very differently from portraits of adult women, where they remain seated and are dressed in light colors to highlight meekness and innocence. The different aesthetic elements behind portraits for different sexes indicates the distinct standards when evaluating men and women: for men the more powerful the better, yet for women the innocuous powerlessness and ignorance is the pursuit.

### 3. CONCLUSION

Cross examining two artists' portraits of girls, one can observe how the manipulation of composition, eye placement, postures and shadow-casting can create a visual preference of conventional feminine attributes—submissive, innocuous and conquerable. This passage only compares two specific portraits of girls from the two artists, while both painters had produced numerous other portraits featuring female models. Moreover, although they are two prominent artists in their eras, it is still inconclusive to ignore the works of hundreds of other portrait painters. This analysis draws from a limited sample and assumes it to be representative of the artists' overall depictions of femininity. Evidence of other female portraits from Velázquez, Sargent as well as other similar painters in Baroque period and the Gilded Age can further solidify the argument of women objectification. To develop a more comprehensive view of the issue, following research,

preferably visual analysis on other depictions of female in their eras will need to be conducted. It is also beneficial to examine counterexamples such as portraits implying gender equality, or portraits by female artists themselves.

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