

Spanish Style

ON THE CUSP OF A GOLDEN AGE

By Gail Leggio

The poet Luis de Góngora (1561–1627), an acclaimed practitioner of the international Baroque style—most familiar in the English-speaking world through the Metaphysical poetry of John Donne and Richard Crashaw—wrote a sonnet eulogizing El Greco (1541–1614), praising the painter for “the softest brush/ Ever to give spirit to wood, life to linen.”¹ The young Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) painted a portrait of the poet in 1622. *Luis de Góngora y Argote* is an austere composition in brown and black; a narrow white collar draws attention to the strong, intelligent if not particularly attractive face. The portrait originally included a laurel wreath, a conventional attribute for an illustrious writer. Velázquez painted it out, a gesture that fits our idea of a forward-thinking, naturalistic artist. We think of Velázquez as a more modern painter than El Greco, an art historical view epitomized by the Metropolitan Museum’s 2003 blockbuster exhibition “Manet/Velázquez: The French Taste for Spanish Art.” El Greco likely received his first artistic training in a monastery on his native Crete, where the Byzantine style lingered. Cretan artists were known for their facility in shifting between manners, *alla bizantina* or *alla veneziana*.² El Greco traveled to Venice to work in Titian’s studio and absorb the lessons of Tintoretto and Veronese, then went to Rome soon



El Greco, *Fray Hortensio
Félix Paravicino*, 1609

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON



Juan Sánchez Cotán, *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber*, c. 1600
SAN DIEGO MUSEUM OF ART

after the death of Michelangelo, when Mannerism was becoming the dominant style. But El Greco found a spiritual home in Toledo, Spain, immortalized in his fluid, expressionistic *View of Toledo* (1600).

View of Toledo is one of eleven paintings by El Greco in a surprising, compact exhibition, “El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III,” at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which includes seven paintings by Velázquez. The majority of the works on view—forty-two out of sixty—are by lesser-known if intriguing artists. El Greco and Velázquez provide not only marquee appeal but also a juicy stylistic dialogue. Some of the El Greco paintings fit our preconceptions about a master of fluid Mannerism and rhetorical piety, as in the ectoplasmic figure *St. James* (c. 1610–14). But other works have a solid humanity that is appealingly straightforward. Velázquez owned and prized three portraits by El Greco, which ones we do not know. If they were anywhere near the caliber of *Fray Hortensio Félix Paravicino* (1609), it is easy to understand Velázquez’s admiration. The black-and-white robes of Paravicino’s order have a splendid graphic punch against the darkness of the leather, high-backed chair and the smoky background. The handling of the drapery demonstrates relaxed virtuosity. Paravicino, like Donne, was a poet-preacher renowned for the passion and wit of his sermons. El Greco draws attention to

the warmth and intelligence of his dark eyes and to the grace of his hands, the way he holds his place in a small book while steadying a larger tome against his leg. The personality of the sitter is paramount, and the artist has simplified his manner in service of the subject. Paravicino returned the favor, thanking the poet in a sonnet: “O Greek divine! We wonder not that in thy works / The imagery surpasses actual being.”³

Literary figures play a big role in the exhibition catalogue. The reign of Philip III (1598–1621) was a transitional period, just on the cusp of Spain’s golden age of painting but extraordinarily rich in writers, including Miguel de Cervantes (1547–1616) and the playwright Lope de Vega (1562–1635). The immediate background includes some of the finest religious writers of the Christian tradition: Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556), Teresa of Avila (1515–82) and John of the Cross (1542–91). In many ways, El Greco, for all his idiosyncratic genius, embodies the contradictions of the era’s Spanish painting, which is both cosmopolitan and insular. The hieratic conventions of religious paintings and court portraits persist even as a new naturalism is emerging. Instead of the neat—and always suspect—model of avant-garde artists supplanting conservatives, we find what the catalogue authors describe as a “commingling of forward-looking trends with archaic compositions.”⁴

We see that stylistic bifurcation in images of the Immaculate Conception, which conflates the Virgin Mary with Saint John’s vision of the Apocalyptic Woman, clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet and a crown of stars. Francisco Pacheco’s *Virgin of Immaculate Conception with Miguel del Cid* (1619) is old-fashioned, including the figure of the author of a popular hymn, looking up at the apparition of Mary. Behind him is the Tower of Gold, a Seville landmark and an allusion to the “Tower of David” from the Marian litany. Cherub heads crowd around her in schematic clouds, and the translucent crescent of the moon could be an element from a Tarot card. Velázquez’s *The Immaculate Conception* (1618–19) dates from the same time, but the Virgin has the natural grace of a young girl. Her hair is loose, and the clouds and moon seem to belong to the night sky rather than a processional idol. Sometimes the dynamic between devotional image and naturalistic figure plays out in a single work. El Greco’s *Saint Jerome as Scholar* (c. 1610) shows the Church Father with his Bible translation, the Vulgate. His face is worn by the asceticism of his time in the desert, but the usual hagiographic elements, such as his companion lion, are missing. The artist has even eliminated the halo. El Greco has adapted the conventions of the secular Venetian portrait to a religious subject.

If El Greco secularized his saints, a current of spirituality runs through the secular genre of the still life. This is especially true in the paintings of Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627), a Carthusian laybrother whose works are strikingly imaginative. His studies of humble vegetables are not symbolic; there is no implicit lesson, as in the vanitas tradition. But they have metaphysical, as

well as physical, heft, and they look modern rather than period. *Still Life with Quince, Cabbage, Melon and Cucumber* (c. 1600) may be plebian in subject matter, but how he handles these objects is an unfolding mystery. The realism is startling, a tour de force of sculptural weight, textural variety, subtle color and chiaroscuro. The controlling geometry is provided by a simple, square, wide-ledged window. Strong front lighting spotlights objects against an inky void backdrop, an effect we associate with Caravaggio. The cucumber and the edge of a melon slice extend beyond the ledge, casting shadows and invading the viewer's space—like the hand of Christ that seems to fall out of the picture space in Caravaggio's stupendous *Deposition* in the Vatican picture gallery.

Sánchez Cotán painted the window with the solemn void first, the catalogue authors point out, adding the still-life elements once the initial coat of paint had dried.⁵ The niche may represent a *cantarero* or *despensa*, storage spaces in Spanish houses, cross-ventilated so that food would not spoil. But the abstract geometry must have appealed to an artist of such sophistication. The way objects are arranged is aesthetically calculated, rather than realistic. The heavy quince and bulky cabbage are suspended from strings clearly too fragile to support their weight. The eye descends from the soft yellow quince, high on the left, to the lower-hung cabbage, to the spherical melon, splayed open to reveal a valley of seeds, to a melon slice like a ship's prow, to the pebble-textured cucumber. The movement is a graceful downward curve, like a swag of heavy fabric coming to rest. It ends in a neat little triangle of light in the corner of the window frame. In another striking composition, *Still Life with Fruit and Vegetables* (c. 1602), Sánchez Cotán suspends his produce in a crazy Pythagorean left-to-right diagonal, shortest to longest: cut citrus, whole citrus, a tight vegetable composed of furled stalks and leaves, carrots hanging down like a fistful of daggers. Curvy cardoons lie languidly on the sill beneath. Baroque art, in both its visual and verbal manifestations, combines an intense awareness of the physical world with an acknowledgment of how ephemeral that world is. Luis de Góngora captures that paradox in his poem "While in a Competition with Your Hair." After comparing a beautiful woman to gold, crystal and flowers, he ends with these stark lines:

Not only silver or plucked violet
become, but you and it together turn
into earth, smoke, dust, shadow, nothingness.⁶

Sánchez Cotán touches that chord in his still lifes when he juxtaposes the sensuous heft of vegetables with the void of the background.

While Sánchez Cotán may be the breakthrough artist in the exhibition, other still-life painters illuminate this intriguing period. Juan van der Hamen y León (1596–1631) was the son of a Brussels painter who had relocated to Spain. Van der Hamen's *Still Life with Sweets* (1621) uses the formula of a stone ledge

with a black-void background, but the objects are not organic produce. They are man-made delicacies, hidden by artful packaging: two round wooden boxes, one smaller than the other, containing marzipan, topped by a jar of cherry preserves, beside an ornate chalice-shaped ceramic honey jar and a silver spoon. It's a worldly, haute-bourgeois image that would not be out of place in a prosperous Flemish interior. In this period, Flemish and Italian art was much admired and collected in Spain. Paintings, painters and prints were all imported. This trend can be seen not only in still lifes but in genre paintings, what the Spanish called *bodegones*, scenes of kitchens and market sellers. The painter Pacheco defended still lifes and *bodegones*, despite their common subject matter, as a test of the artist's mimetic skills: "if the picture from nature possesses relief and force, it appears round like a solid volume and lifelike and deceives the eye as if it were coming out of the picture."⁷ This taste for "strength and relief" (*fuertza y relieve*) helps explain the strain of naturalism in golden age Spanish painting, so attractive to later generations because it provides realistic ballast to the highly conceptual pictorial rhetoric of Church and State.

The apotheosis of the *bodegón* may be Velázquez's *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618), painted just after the nineteen-year-old artist had finished his apprenticeship with Pacheco. The painting depicts common folk, an old woman and a boy, preparing a makeshift meal, but the scene is simplified, solemnized. It lacks the anecdotal incident, local color, bawdiness or moralizing of a Flemish genre painting or print. The palette is somber, all nuances of brown, black and cream. The figures, plain people in every sense, are treated with dignity, but Velázquez is clearly more enamored of the simple still life—a stoneware pitcher, gleaming metal pans, the cooking pot with sunnyside-up eggs, a simple bowl bisected by a balanced knife that casts a concave shadow. All these elements are in the foreground, seen from above at an exaggerated angle. The catalogue authors see the influence of Jacopo Bassano, an Italian painter much admired in Spain, in "the upward tilt of objects in space, the reflected light on the utensils, the bird's-eye view, and the mood of introspection."⁸ Velázquez intensifies that strategy, moving it away from narrative—Bassano is a fine pictorial storyteller as well as an excellent painter—and toward something more abstract. Work surfaces tilt until they almost parallel the picture plane. They have a modernist appeal, suggesting a particular kind of Cubism—not Picasso's fractured time-space continuum but Juan Gris's more solid, more grounded experiments. Another genre painting by Velázquez in the exhibition, *Kitchen Scene with Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* (probably 1618), is based on a Flemish print, Jacob Matham's engraving after Pieter Aertsen. Again, the still life in the foreground—eggs, fish, a metal mortar and pestle—takes precedence, with a young and an old woman as supporting players. The scene of Christ, Martha and Mary is relegated to a small framed square that could be either a window or a painting hung on the wall. Velázquez is still a young artist during the span of this exhibition; the great masterpieces would be created in the reign of Philip

IV (1621–64). But the painter has already remade the self-conscious theater of the Baroque in his own style.

We think of sixteenth-century Spain as a closed, conservative society, exemplified by the pious fortress of the Escorial, haunted by the specter of the Grand Inquisitor, a country whose arrogance was chastened by the defeat of the Armada sent against England in 1588. But Philip II was a prodigious collector, who preferred Titian to El Greco, and the network of cultural exchange grows during the early decades of the seventeenth century. The 26-year-old Peter Paul Rubens visited Spain in 1603 as an envoy for Vincenzo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua. Perhaps influenced by El Greco's *St. Martin and the Beggar* (1597–99), Rubens painted a highly influential picture of a politically powerful art collector, the *Equestrian Portrait of the Duke of Lerma*. The Spanish painter Jusepe de Ribera, represented in this exhibition by *Saints Peter and Paul* (c. 1616), went on to fame in Rome and Naples. A 1992 retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City revealed Ribera as the equal of Caravaggio. A good, lesser-known painter, Juan Bautista Maino (1581–1649), was the son of an Italian father and a Portuguese mother. Trained in Italy, he was a friend of Annibale Carracci and Guido Reni. Maino's *Adoration of the Magi* (1612) packs a lot into its narrow vertical format, but the opulent jumble of magi and attendants is calmed by the grace and dignity of the mother, who supports her preternaturally poised infant son as he raises a hand in blessing. Spain would export Flemish prints and Spanish painters to the New World. The great Francisco Zurbarán (1598–1664) was an entrepreneur in the Indies trade as well as a painter and sent many paintings to Latin America. The explosion of creativity when European conventions—iconographic, stylistic, compositional—collided with indigenous traditions in Mexico and Peru resulted in spectacular art.⁹

This focused exhibition, covering a little more than two decades, takes us some way toward defining the unique flavor of Spanish painting. The catalogue, with essays by Antonio Feros, Ronni Baer, Sarah Schroth, Laura R. Bass and Rosemary Mulcahy, provides historical and literary background, as well as analysis of complex art movements (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications). "El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III" is on view through July 27, 2008, at the Museum of Fine Arts, 465 Huntington Avenue, Boston, Massachusetts 02115. Telephone (617) 267-9300. On the web at www.mfa.org. It travels to the co-organizing institution, the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, where it will be on view August 21–November 9, 2008.

NOTES

1. Cited, *El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2008), p. 174.
2. See the catalogue for an exhibition at the Onassis Cultural Center, New York, *Post-Byzantium: The Greek Renaissance* (Athens: Byzantine and Christian Museum, 2002), p. 15.
3. Cited, *El Greco to Velázquez*, p. 201.

4. Ibid., p. 119.
5. Ibid., p. 268.
6. Harold B. Segel, *The Baroque Poem: A Comparative Survey* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1974), p. 222.
7. *El Greco to Velázquez*, p. 270.
8. Ibid.
9. See Diana Fane, editor, *Converging Cultures: Art and Identity in Spanish America* (Brooklyn Museum in association with Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1996).

SPANISH REALISM TODAY

Running concurrently at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, "Antonio López García" is the first retrospective at an American museum for this important artist. The exhibition of forty-five paintings, drawings and sculptures includes nine works from the museum's own collection, representing a serious commitment to a school too little known in the United States. While contemporary Spanish realists display considerable stylistic diversity, they share a taste for naturalism, patient craftsmanship and respect for humble subjects—characteristics of the legacy of Velázquez and Ribera. López (b. 1936) entered the San Fernando School of Fine Arts in Madrid at age 13 and, as a young artist, investigated surrealism, or the version of it described as magic realism. *Atocha* (1964) retains an element of enigmatic narrative, juxtaposing a nude, copulating couple with a detailed view of the area around Madrid's railway station. López's cityscapes can take months or even years to complete. *South Madrid* (1965–85) became a long-term project, evolving over two decades as the artist meticulously recorded the changing city from his chosen vantage point. His oil paintings do not have the rich surfaces and velvety chiaroscuro of the old

masters. Matte surfaces and diffuse, filtered light signal López's awareness of modernism. *New Refrigerator* (1991–94) is an unmistakably late-twentieth-century work. The open door of the appliance reveals a consumer-society cornucopia, and the heavy form seems to float against a cloudy, almost abstract space. The most striking work is *Sink and Mirror* (1967), a vertiginous tight shot down into a bathroom sink. A glass shelf of toiletries functions as a suspended altar and displaced portrait of the absent resident. The pearly daylight, from an unseen source, softly illuminates everyday paraphernalia.



Antonio López García, *Sink and Mirror*, 1967
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