

Excerpted from Norbert Wolf, *Velazquez*. Koln: Taschen, 1999, 47-59, 94-95.

## A Humane Equilibrium

In the Salon de Reinos, the throne-room of Buen Retiro where courtly ceremony was displayed to the full, symbolically representing the monarchy to the outside world, a series of ten pictures by Zurbaran on the theme of Hercules hung beside the equestrian portraits of members of the Spanish ruling house of Habsburg. There were also twelve battle scenes showing the latest victories won under Philip IV: All the military paintings follow the same standard pattern: they banish war itself to the background and show the victorious commanders full-length in the foreground, where the figures of rulers are usually placed in other works.

The battle pieces may well have been painted by Velazquez' artistic colleagues Eugenio Caxes (1573/74-1634) and Vicente Carducho, or by Zurbaran. They are not particularly original, unlike die paintings by Fray Juan Bautista Maino and (as one might expect) by Velazquez himself. Maino's painting was taken from the subject of a play by Lope de Vega celebrating the recapture of Bahia in Brazil by the Portuguese and Castilians after its occupation by the Dutch. However, the main theme of the picture is not so much the battle as the noble magnanimity of the victors and their care for the wounded.



*Spanish Soldier*, detail from *The Surrender of Breda*, 1634/35

In *The Surrender of Breda*, painted in 1634 to 1635 (page 2), Velazquez too makes a fundamental statement about humane conduct amidst the horrors of war. Many contemporary witnesses felt sure that the long struggle for the Netherlands would determine the future position of Spain as a world power. The most important fortress in the southern Netherlands was Breda in Brabant, and the strategic significance of the place was correctly assessed by Philip IV's best commander in the Thirty Years' War, Ambrosio Spinola, a rich Genoese nobleman who had been awarded the Order of the Golden Fleece. The commander of the fortress on the opposite side, Justinus of Nassau, was another military man famous throughout Europe. After a four-month siege and when all the provisions in the fortress had run out, he was forced to petition for an honorable surrender. Spinola allowed him to leave under conditions that were extremely generous for the period.

The official surrender took place on June 5, 1625. The conquered army was permitted to leave the city with dignity, carrying its colors and its weapons. Spinola was waiting on horseback at the city gate with a few noblemen, and magnanimously saluted the Dutch general as he came first out of the fortress, followed by his wife riding in a carriage.

News of the victory was greeted with relief and delight in Madrid, and by Pope Urban VIII in Rome. The Pope congratulated Spinola on washing his hands in the blood of the heretics. A play by Calderon de la Barca on the subject of the siege of Breda was performed in Madrid in November 1625. The dramatist makes Spinola say of his adversary, in a proud yet modest phrase that has become proverbial, "The valor of the conquered makes the conqueror famous". The young Velazquez probably saw the production of this play at court. Now, nine years later and after making many drawings as preparatory studies, he was to paint a historical picture on the subject. During his work he kept casting a critical eye on the events shown on his canvas, correcting and painting over them, yet the final result conveys a sense of great ease. Velazquez had painted one of the most famous and accomplished war pictures in the history of art—



*Spanish Soldier*, detail from *The Surrender of Breda*, 1634/35

and it is surely the most deeply moving in human terms.

Detail from *The Surrender of Breda* (Las Lanzas), 1634/35. Velazquez met Spinola himself during his first visit to Italy. In the picture he emphasizes the commander's nobility and humanity. Spinola is chivalrously receiving his defeated opponent Justinus of Nassau, laying a hand on his shoulder in recognition of his enemy's feats, and apparently ignoring the humiliating act of the surrender of the key.



LEFT: Don Pedro de Barberana, detail from *The Surrender of Breda*, 1634/35

RIGHT: Don Pedro de Barberana (detail), 1631/32, Oil on canvas, 198.1 x 111.4 cm, Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum  
BELOW: *The Surrender of Breda* (Las Lanzas), 1634/35. Oil on canvas. 307.5 x 370.5 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado.



An impressive and dramatic scene of war unfolds on the huge canvas. The viewer has an aerial view of the now silent battlefield in the distance; smoke rises from fifes beneath clouds and blue-gray mists. We look across trenches, waterworks and blockhouses; only Breda itself is absent from the picture. The brightly lit background, bathed in shades of pale blue and pink, suggests the landscape backgrounds of Tintoretto. The Dutch are coming up from the depths of the picture, passing from right to left through the double line of upright Spanish spears. Velazquez makes this dense forest of spears pointing to the sky so dominant a feature of the picture as a whole that it has given the painting its sub-title of *Las Lanzas*.

By now the protagonists have assembled on the rising ground in

front, which is the main scene of the action and on the viewer's eye-level. There are nine figures on each side: the Dutch to the left, the Spanish to the right. The group on the left opens up and the Dutch commander steps forward, his glance sad and weary, sketching a bow as he hands over the key of the city. With delicacy of feeling, Spinola bends down to him and lays his mailed hand on his enemy's shoulder with a courteous smile—a sympathetic and a noble gesture. Behind him, a groom forces a magnificent nervously prancing horse to one side.

The group of defeated men is constructed more loosely and with more variety of lighting and color than the well-disciplined company of victors: the Dutch are weather-beaten soldiers like the musketeer on the left of the picture (p. 1); the Spanish are more elegant and sophisticated. The wall of spears, the weapons of the undefeated *tercios*, the famous Spanish infantry, emphasizes their still menacing power, at the same time lending the military commander's humanity and merciful conduct its full weight and providing a foil for it.

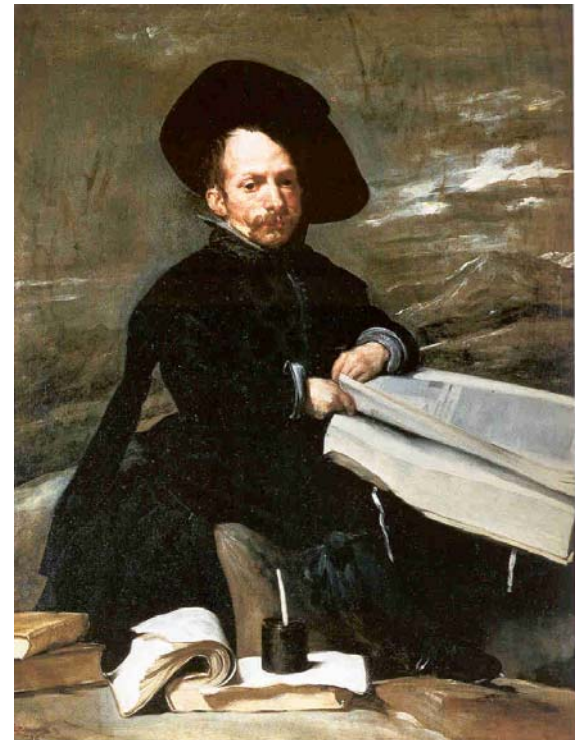
The bearing and appearance of the soldiers display Velazquez' inexhaustibly rich orchestration of their feelings and their states of mind. In some of the faces he has taken his inspiration from types of his own invention, for instance the figures in the *Forge of Vulcan*. The officer with chestnut-brown hair to the right behind Spinola represents Don Pedro de Barberana, a knight of the Order of Calatrava, whom the court painter had already portrayed in 1631/32 (p.2). The vibrant application of paint, the painter's extraordinary understanding of the way in which light and the atmosphere can change colors, the symphony of brilliant and muted tones that fills the picture, making it sparkle and glow with joyful harmonies, the manner in which the composition concentrates dramatically on the surrender of the key while the formal rhythms of victory and defeat unfold, all mark a crucial watershed in the art of Velazquez.

The *Surrender of Breda*, which contains no allegorical or mythological references, is indisputably the first purely historical picture in modern European painting, and among the outstanding works of world art. In another manner, and one that is always striking and sometimes curiously moving to modern observers, Velazquez shows human nature in all its diversity when he presents the gallery of dwarfs and jesters who lived at court and whose task it was to preserve the king from boredom in the midst of routine etiquette.



*Dwarf*. detail from Prince Baltasar Carlos with the Count-Duke of Olivares at the Royal Mews. c. 1636

Under cover of joking, the court jesters or buffoons, in Spanish *truhanes*, would often tell their lords and masters the home truths openly discussed by the ordinary people. They could move freely in the king's presence, trying to amuse the naturally melancholic Philip IV with their caustic remarks. To judge by their salaries, their position in society was quite high. Velazquez himself, on entering the service of the palace as a court painter, had at first been classed with the royal servants, and as a result shared the life of these *truhanes*. The dwarfs who acted as living toys—and sometimes as whipping boys for the young princes and princesses—were regarded differently. The hidalgos and ladies of the time, who enjoyed normal stature, probably felt particularly privileged both in mind and body by comparison with the stunted growth and wizened faces of the dwarfs.

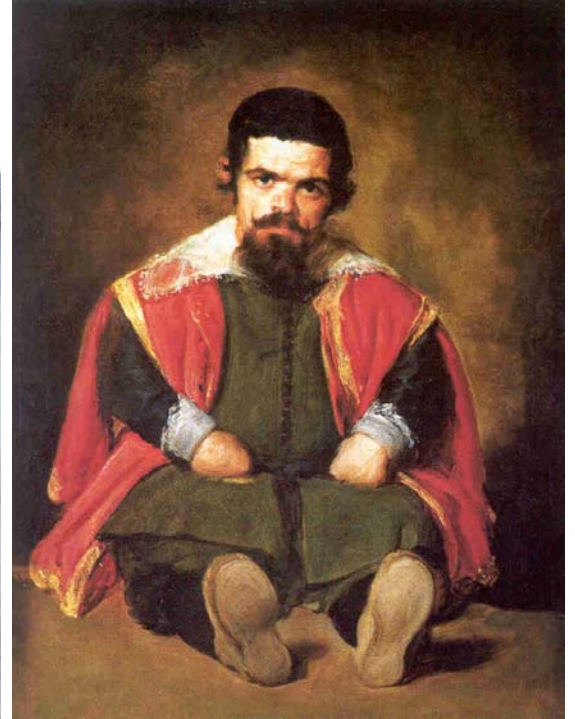


*A Dwarf Holding a Tome on his Lap*, (Don Diego de Acedo, el Primo). c. 1645. Oil on canvas. 106 x 83 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado

Finally, and in the lowest social category, came those freaks of nature, the harmlessly deranged, constituting a kind of human menagerie. With his brilliant powers of observation and his psychological sensitivity, Velazquez recorded every detail of the physical abnormalities and confused minds of this curious class of society, with perfect honesty, but never mocking or caricaturing them, never depicting them with perverse pleasure, or indeed with feigned or sentimental pity. On

the contrary, we sense a stoically calm humanity in his attitude to these sitters—and we recognize a greatness of mind that was in no way inferior to his artistic genius.

RIGHT: *A Dwarf Sitting on the Floor (Don Sebastian de Morra?)*, c. 1645. Oil on canvas, 106.5 x 81.8 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado. This painting, a copy of which by Velazquez is also extant, originally hung in the Alcazar in Madrid. Today the picture has been considerably cut down, particularly at the right-hand border.



Salvador Dali, *Velazquez Dying behind the Window on the Left Side out of which a Spoon Projects*, 1982. Oil on canvas with collages, 75 x 59.5 cm. Figueras, Teatro-Museo Salvador Dali



The first portrait Velazquez painted in 1628/29 of a court jester was that of Juan Calabazas or Calabacillas. Ten years later, around 1637-1639, he painted him again (*below*). All the firm lines have now gone from the buffoon's face; instead, its surface consists of an extraordinarily subtle texture of color and shade, while the white lace collar is a fantastic, filmy tissue. The small eyes look out from deep sockets. The motif and the sense of picturesque unreality convey the idea of a strange intermediate world where the court jester perhaps lived his real life.



*The Dwarf Francisco Lezcano (right)*, painted by Velazquez around 1643-1645 as a retarded boy of fifteen, was a burlesque piece that formed part of the decoration of the Torre de la Parada. The feeble-minded dwarf, dressed in green, is lovingly caressing the playing cards he holds. His bloated, over-large features are almost monumental, and a curious beauty plays over the face of the hydrocephalic dwarf.



For his pictures of these fools and dwarfs Velazquez often chose the format of a rectangle coming down close to the head, within which the figures crouch as if in

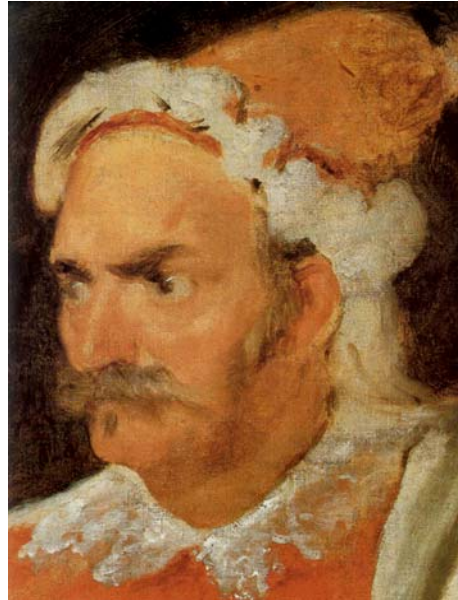
a compact, closely circumscribed world; another example is the portrait of *A Dwarf Holding a Tome on his Lap* (p. 3). This picture, painted around 1645, was also in the Torre de la Parada. We are not sure of the name of the sitter clad in elegant black with an extravagant hat, leafing through a book and appearing to take a great interest in literature. Was he in fact "El Primo", who believed himself, as the nickname indicates, a cousin of Velazquez? Is he the same dwarf as the one shown behind Prince Baltasar Carlos in a painting of c. 1636? His identity remains a matter of controversy and is perhaps

of no importance by comparison with the fascinatingly life-like depiction of his figure in front of a strangely eerie background.



The dwarf who, along with El Primo, enjoyed the highest esteem at court was Don Sebastian de Morra. He is probably the subject of *A Dwarf Sitting on the Floor* (p. 4 and left). There are two versions of this portrait, both painted around 1645. The composition is extremely original, and in the twentieth century Salvador Dali was inspired to produce a surrealist paraphrase (p. 4). The bearded dwarf is sitting on the floor, wearing green with a short red cloak. His legs are stretched out in front of him, feet pointing upwards in a comical position that shows the viewer the dirty soles of his shoes, and his stumpy arms contrast with his massive torso, making it look almost like a monumental bust. The intense play of light and shade and the deliberately broad application of highlights illustrate the dwarf's irascible character.

Velazquez shows all the deformities of these comical or feeble-minded members of court society—as well as all the individual features deriving from violent emotion, congenital mental handicap and from age. He also painted a masterly picture of *The Buffoon Don Cristobal de Castalieda y Pernia* (far right, and detail, right), who was first in rank among the court jesters. He gave himself airs as a great military expert, thus earning the nickname of Barbarroja (Barbarossa or Red-beard). His red robe is almost Turkish in style, and his headdress suggests a fool's cap. He glares fiercely into space, and while he grips the sheath of his sword firmly, the sword itself is held in a relaxed position.



*Aesop*, c. 1639-1641, Oil on canvas, 179.5 x 94 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado

The classical author of the famous fables holds his hand close to his chest, which in the figurative language of the time may refer to the character type of the phlegmatic man. The barrel at Aesop's feet is also an indication that this type was supposed to have a special affinity with water.

RIGHT: *The Buffoon Pablo de Valladolid*, c. 1636/37  
Oil on canvas, 213.5 x 125 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

The court jester, posing like an actor, stands in a curiously indeterminate space showing no floor-line. Later painters such as Goya and Manet were enthusiastic about this masterpiece, not least for its originally lowering tones of gray in the background, now turned to an unattractive ochre.

FAR RIGHT: Edouard Manet, *The Fifer*, 1866. Oil on canvas, 161 x 97 cm. Paris, Musee d'Orsay



Velazquez began this portrait towards the end of the 1630s and left it unfinished; another painter later worked on it, in particular on the gray cloak. Despite their handicaps the dwarfs and jesters depicted by Velazquez are also acute observers of worldly power. The fascinating penetration imparted by the artist to their eyes in particular suggests that, looking out from their own intermediate world, they can see through all the conventions of a society that believes itself superior, and view it more clearly than many a "normal" courtier. The artist's intellectual attitude here helps to explain the similarities between these human outsiders and his pictures of philosophers.

His *Aesop* (p. 5) is now almost unanimously dated to around 1639-1641, and it is thought to have been painted for the Torre de la Parada, with the *Menippus* of the same period (right). Aesop, the classical author who reflected human life in the guise of animal fables, and the philosopher Menippus, a cynic and satirist, are both shown full length and would have made suitable counterparts to the pictures of Democritus and Heraclitus by Rubens in the Torre de la Parada. Velazquez gave Aesop's face the fleshy features of the human "ox-head type" described in the physiognomical doctrines of the Italian Giovanni Battista della Porta, published in 1586, which again calls Aesop's animal fables to mind.

Of greater importance, however, are the eyes: one almost feels that in the landscape of Aesop's face they are all that is left of the grounding of the canvas. They are deep-seated and probing, turned on the observer with a slight touch of contempt. Like the eyes of many of Velazquez' dwarfs and fools, their gaze is full of the irony that sees through convention. Aesop, who lived from about 620 to 560 BC, began life as a slave and died a violent death. In this picture his face, marked by suffering, shows the same simple dignity as that of the court jesters or country folk painted by Velazquez.



*Menippus*, 1639-1641. Oil on canvas, 178.5 x 93.2 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado

For instance, if one compares the face of *The Buffoon Pablo de Valladolid* (p. 5), painted around 1636/37, with the face of the much earlier Democritus, it is easy to see similarities suggesting the possible use of the same model. In the nineteenth century, Edouard Manet was inspired to produce a paraphrase of this picture (p. 5) not so much by the jester's intense facial expression as by the strong tension of his outline.

## Life and Work



*Self-Portrait as Royal Chamberlain*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 101 x 81 cm. Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi

**1599** Birth in Seville of Diego Velazquez, the first child of Juan Rodriguez de Silva and Jeronima Velazquez, members of the lesser nobility. His grandparents had come to Spain from the Portuguese harbor city of Porto. Little is known about Diego's siblings—five brothers and a sister. In accordance with the practice of the times, the young Diego was educated in the humanities.

**1611** Velazquez' father comes to an agreement with Francisco Pacheco on the details of Diego's training with that painter. In his biography of Velazquez, Palomino states that Diego had previously spent a short time studying with Francisco de Herrera the Elder. Poets and scholars as well as artists met at Pacheco's workshop, in an intellectual climate where there was enthusiastic discussion of such subjects as artists of classical antiquity, Raphael, Michelangelo and above all Titian, as well as the theory of art. At this time, Velazquez became familiar with the chiaroscuro painting and naturalistic subjects of the school of Caravaggio.

**1617** Velazquez is accepted into the painters' guild of St. Luke in Seville, after passing an examination assessed by Pacheco and a painter called Juan de Uceda. Membership of this guild was necessary before he could found his own workshop, employ assistants, and receive

commissions from churches and public institutions. On 23 April Velazquez marries Juana, daughter of his teacher Pacheco, who brings several houses in Seville to the marriage as her dowry.

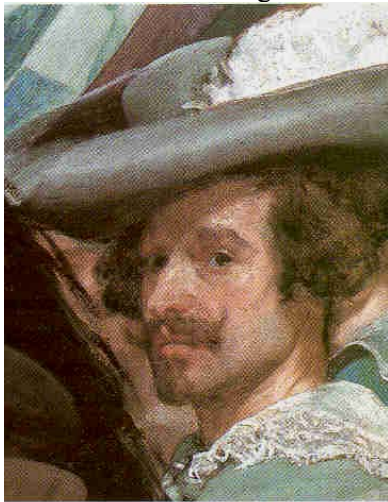
Within less than three years they have 5 two daughters, of whom only one, Francisca, survives. Few of the twenty or so paintings executed by Velazquez in Seville before 1622 are dated and signed; they include nine *bodegones* and his first portraits and religious compositions. Even later, he usually omitted to add dates and signatures.

**1622** Velazquez goes to Madrid for the first time to see the monastery palace of the Escorial near the capital, and its art treasures. He also wishes to paint the new king of Spain, the seventeen-year-old Philip IV; who has been on the throne for a year. Rodrigo de Villandrando, until now the most highly regarded of the court painters, dies at the end of the year. Velazquez visits Toledo to see works by El Greco and other painters of that city, including Pedro de Orrente (1580-1645) and Juan Sanchez Cotan (1561-1627).



Juan Bautista Martinez del Mazo *The Artist's Family*. c. 1660-1665. Oil on canvas. 150 x 172 cm. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

**1623** Velazquez is summoned to court by Olivares in the spring, and receives his first commission for a portrait of Philip IV: The success of this picture brings the artist an appointment as court painter and the privilege of becoming the only artist permitted to paint the king in the future. His brilliant career has begun.



Self-Portrait from *The Surrender of Breda (Las Lanzas)*, 1634/35

**1627** Philip IV organizes an artistic competition between his four official court painters; Velazquez emerges victorious.

Besides various hostile reactions from his rivals, this success brings him an appointment as Usher of the Chamber, an office with the privileges of free board and free medical treatment.

**1628** Peter Paul Rubens pays a second visit to the court in Madrid on diplomatic business. A studio is placed at his disposal in the Alcazar, where Velazquez often visits him at work. Velazquez is the only Spanish painter to be honored with these personal conversations.

**1629** His first journey to Italy takes Velazquez from Genoa to Venice, and then probably to Florence on his way to Rome, where he stays for almost a year. Neither Pope Urban VIII nor other ecclesiastical dignitaries seem to take any interest in his work at this point. He copies old masters, but also paints large compositions of his own including *The Forge of Vulcan* and *Joseph's Bloody Coat Brought to Jacob*. He travels home by way of Naples.

**1631** Velazquez' daughter Francisca, aged fourteen, marries the painter Juan Bautista Martinez del Mazo.

**1635** The Salon de Reinos in the new palace of Buen Retiro in Madrid is completed. Velazquez has been working on its artistic decoration for the past year. One of his major works intended for this setting, together with several equestrian portraits, is *The Surrender of Breda*, part of a cycle of twelve battle pictures by different painters. The art of Velazquez wins increasing admiration at court.

**1636** The hunting lodge of Torre de la Parada, near Madrid, is extended and ornamented with many pictures from the workshop of Rubens, as well as hunting portraits, portraits of dwarfs, and pictures of the classical god of war Mars and of Aesop and Menippus by Velazquez. The king appoints his court painter "Assistant to the Wardrobe" (without salary).

**1643** The Count of Olivares is dismissed from his position as prime minister and banished from court. Shortly before this time, the king promoted Velazquez to the post of Chamberlain in his private chambers (although still without a regular salary). Later he is made assistant to the superintendent of special building projects. In the next few years his art approaches its peak in such pictures as *Venus at her Mirror* and *The Fable of Arachne*.

**1646** At the beginning of this year the king's sister Maria dies; she had been married to Emperor Ferdinand III. Towards the end of the year the king's wife Queen Isabel and the heir to the throne, the young Prince Baltasar Carlos, both die.

**1649** Velazquez travels to Italy again. His main destination is Rome, where, among other pictures, he paints the famous portrait of Pope Innocent X.

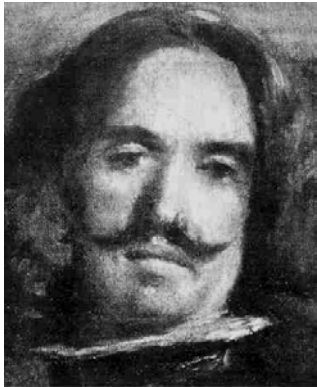
**1650** Velazquez is admitted to the Academy of Rome.

**1651** Velazquez returns to Madrid, where he is to paint a portrait of the new Queen

Mariana, Philip's second wife, although he does not complete it until 1652. He is appointed Supreme Court Marshal out of a list of six candidates. He is now able to move into a large apartment in the Casa del Tesoro, linked by a passage to the royal palace, where he has already had his workshop for years, employing many assistants and pupils (none of whom, however, was of very great artistic merit).



Portrait of Pope Innocent X, 1649.



Self-Portrait from *Las Meninas* or *The Royal Family*. 1656/57

**1652** Probably in this year, an illegitimate son of Velazquez with the first name of Antonio is born in Rome.

**1656** Velazquez begins work on his great masterpiece, *Las Meninas*.

**1659** After many enquiries into the details of his ancestry, Velazquez is admitted to the knightly Order of Santiago.

**1660** Velazquez dies in the palace in Madrid on 6 August.

**1724** Antonio Palomino publishes the first biography of Velazquez.

**1734** The royal palace in Madrid is destroyed by fire; many works by Velazquez are destroyed or badly damaged in the blaze.