

Course Description

Velázquez is one of the most renowned European artists and his paintings make a fascinating subject in their own right. He is a seminal figure for the study of both Spanish history and art; as court painter to the King Philip IV he lived at the heart of the Spanish empire and the many masterpieces he painted for his patron portray key historical figures. What is more, since his death in 1660 his work has since become a continual point of reference for artists - Goya, Manet, and Picasso, amongst many others - and continues to be so. So for anyone with an interest in Spain the work and life of Velázquez is key: it provides valuable insights into the Spanish baroque, and how this historical period and its art continues to be significant today.

The art of Velázquez also provides an excellent point of departure for those wanting to begin studying art history; his artworks look back to and draw on the developments of Renaissance as well as classical art, and they also engaged with artistic issues that subsequent artists would develop over the coming centuries. Therefore this course is also intended for those who may be new to art history or this specific period or subject.

Furthermore it is intended to appeal to people with a range of backgrounds and a variety of long term goals, whether they be: academic study, art practice, working in museums, creative writing or simply the pleasure of looking at artworks in museums. In many senses the last of these is fundamental and a core concern of this course is to develop our skills at looking at paintings, looking closely to trace the creative and intellectual processes that went into their making. As such the skills and knowledge taught on this course are intended to be practical and transferable to a range of professional and cultural activities.

By seeking to appeal to students with diverse interests and experience the participants' distinctive perspectives are a key feature of this course: there is no single way to look at a painting and as a group we will explore and share a range of ways looking at Velázquez's most important paintings. Drawing on my academic research, experience as a curator and above all extensive knowledge of the paintings my role in this course is for you to learn from me and develop the skills you have and enhance them with what you can learn from your fellow students.

Course aims:

1. To offer an introduction to the art of Velázquez through the close analysis of a selection of his paintings.
2. To introduce students to the skills and language employed for the study of artistic and visual culture more generally.
3. To develop critical research skills when using both digital resources and book publications.
4. To gain confidence at discussing and writing about paintings and their artistic and cultural significance.

Course structure:

The course is organised into five modules. In each module we will study two paintings in depth. So by the end of the course you will have an in-depth knowledge of ten of Velázquez's most important paintings. The approach we will take may be compared to reading literature: you read a poem or novel once and you enjoy, marvel at and are impressed by its imagery, style or ideas, but when you read it again carefully and pause to really think about what you have read then you begin to enjoy it new ways and above all understand it. Paintings, indeed images more generally, are more complex than we are led to believe. What you see when you glance at them is just a point of departure, and if you dedicate the time to look up close they prove to be much more than just a picture of something. In Velázquez's day paintings were compared to poems, history and even sermons: they had a lot to say! We will discover what they sought to say at their time what new meanings they have taken on as they been sold, stolen, bought, hung in museums, studied, copied and reworked over the three hundred and more years since they were created.

The way we will look at these paintings is by asking questions. We will begin from the basics. For example: how big is the painting? When was it painted? The painting as a physical object with a history provides an important foundation for looking. We will then move on to consider who or what scene is represented in the painting and the why are why has it been shown in this way. As we undertake this enquiry into the painting we will refer to other paintings by Velázquez - did he paint this person's portrait on other occasions? Did he always paint such big paintings? What other mythological or religious subjects did he paint? - as well as academic publications. So as we progress you will discover other works by Velázquez in addition to paintings by his contemporaries, earlier artists and also more modern ones. You will also get used to working with a range of digital resources for the study of art.

As we proceed with each module each student will create a "file" on each painting, just like museums keep a file on each painting. The starting point for this file is a copy of the image itself, its title, date and all the other information you can find about this painting. These picture files are always "work in progress" until the end of the course so you can add any new discoveries made during discussion activities with your fellow students, or from subsequent modules that shed new light on previous ones. A template for these painting files will be provided, but students can modify them to reflect their interests. At the end of the course they will be assessed.

One important section of these picture files is bibliography. This should record all the sources that have been consulted to learn about the painting. These sources will include digital resources such as museum websites, but they should also include the books and articles that have been read. For each module a number of texts will be set and wider reading will also be recommended. However, it is important to note that research in libraries is also recommended. There are two reasons for this. University libraries or public libraries, such as those you can often find in museums, very often provide access to specialist digital resources, and of course they include books and articles that cannot be found on-line.

As this course is about the study of paintings it does not aim to be an exclusively on-line course. Indeed it is also recommended that students take time to go to galleries and museums. However, not necessarily to study Velázquez, which may be nigh impossible, but rather to maintain a focus on the study paintings. Velázquez painted portraits, landscapes, mythological and religious subjects and scenes of everyday life and a selection of such works can be found in most museums and galleries. Undertaking these "indirect" study trips will provide a valuable opportunity for training your visual skills and developing you appreciation of the complexity of painting as a medium; you will then be fully prepared to look at a real Velázquez up close when the opportunity arises in Madrid, London, New York or Sao Paolo. Finally, by going to galleries it is intended that you enjoy and are inspired by looking at art. In every way possible this course will offer inspiration and be an enjoyable experience of learning and sharing ideas, yet nothing beats the real thing!