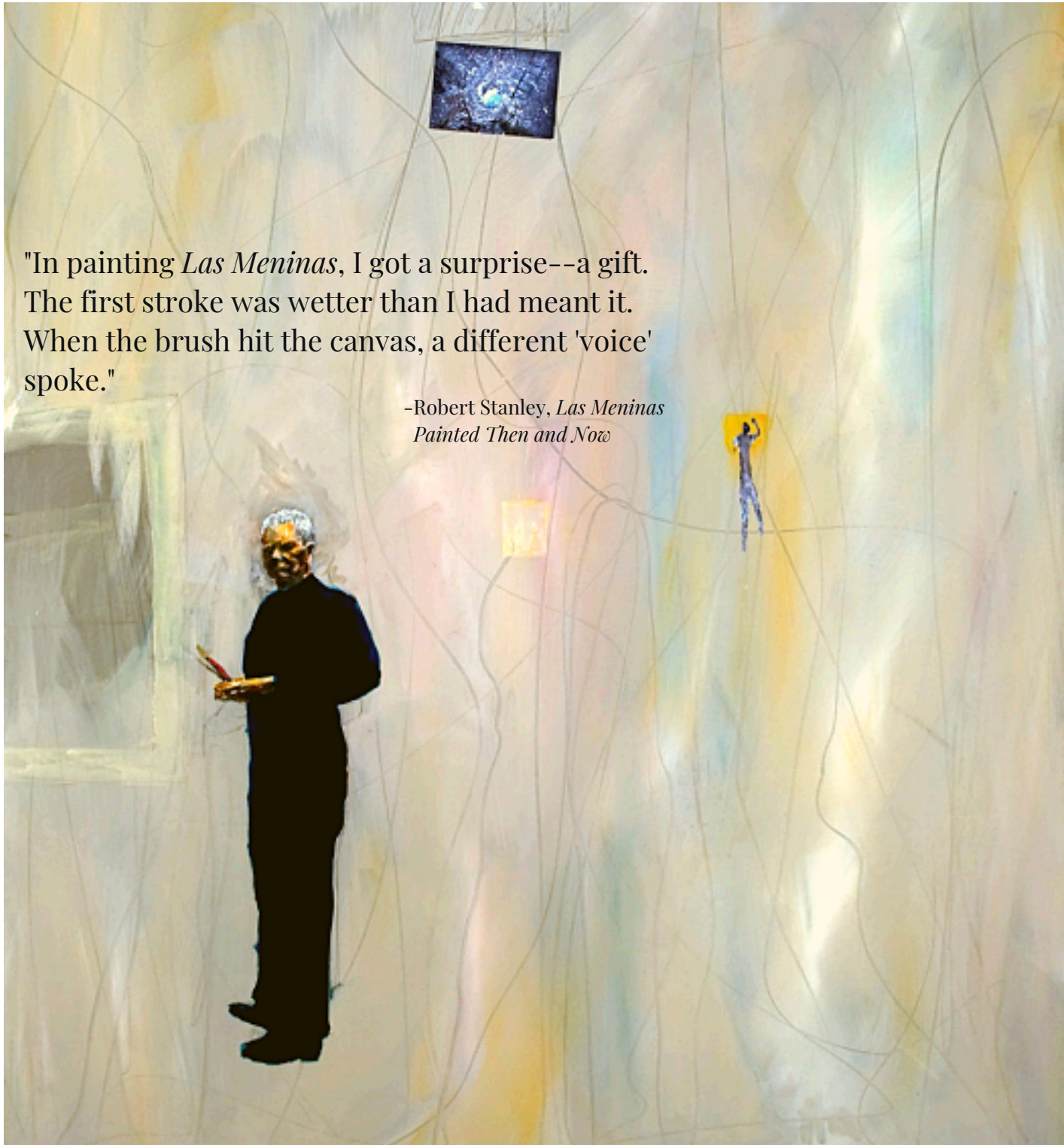


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"In painting *Las Meninas*, I got a surprise--a gift. The first stroke was wetter than I had meant it. When the brush hit the canvas, a different 'voice' spoke."

-Robert Stanley, *Las Meninas
Painted Then and Now*

Las Meninas Painted Then and Now

Robert Stanley

“Comparisons are odious.” Not so. The aphorism is quite overextended, perhaps as a defensive shield by persons and philosophies that would suffer from the good that comparisons can bring. In fact, comparisons are often necessary to improve technique, provide clarity, and illuminate competing philosophies.

Occasionally, I create an artistic dialog with a past or present work of art. Usually it focuses on the content rather than technique.¹ The content of a good work carries cultural implications of the period in which it was created. One of my dialog works, with Velazquez’ *Las Meninas* (1656), reveals a current understanding of reality, compared to worldviews of the past.

Las Meninas was painted in the mid 17th century, as Western Culture was very vigorous in an age of exploration founded on humanist traditions invigorated by the preceding Renaissance. For all that, the painting’s composition reveals a very definite perspective. A definite point of view was the ground of the values of the time of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, where allegiance to groups and traditions were expected.²



Comparing Velazquez' *Las Meninas* to my *Las Meninas*, reveals the differences in the two cultures from which they arose. The main difference is contemporary fluidity. My setting is not an ordered, bounded perspective, but rather, it is a flow. The 17th century individual was constrained by a very definite point of view, as echoed by the strict perspective in the Velazquez. The views of mid-17th century society were also fixed. Class and gender roles were hard and fast. The Scientific Revolution had not yet taken hold. Today, nearly everything is in flux, from gender roles to a full scientific definition of the very matter of which we are made. Thus in my work, flow dominates all. It is not "background" in the usual sense, but is the basis of the work--the very ground of its being.

In Velazquez' work the person in the doorway is fixed in a specific time and place. In my work, this is not the case. There he is rendered as a swimmer in the flow, more representative of people today, caught up in the currents of change and uncertainty.

The walls of the room in Velazquez' work have rows of paintings, which reveal the importance of tradition in art in this era. My painting sees the traditions as much more dynamic, in the form of Jasper Johns' *Untitled 1992* tumbling in the general current. A vast problem in our era is the role of tradition. Some see the entire bundle of our traditions, including mores and morals, as "patriarchal," or systems of oppression. This attempt at complete rejection makes all that we've learned from previous societies obsolete. Rather than slavish total acceptance or empty complete rejection, our traditions need to be reflected on, their essence distilled and where in harmony with human nature, wisdom, and advancement, used.

Tangentially, there is also an element of "abstract" (as in music) enjoyment in my painting. Just as music does not need to have words to be enjoyed, so visual art does not need to have recognizable objects to be enjoyed. For example, many enjoy the religious art of other cultures, not out of belief in the object's representation, but out of appreciation of its beauty. (However, it seems not all people have this trait. Viktor Lowenfeld identified those who do have it as "haptic .")³

In this work, elements that can be enjoyed for themselves, devoid of "meaning," include: the colors themselves, contrasting but subtly so; the soft blending; the unity and variety of the flows, one softly painted, the other sharply incised; the range of lights and darks; a brightness and openness overall; and the well-balanced but asymmetrical visual objects.

In painting *Las Meninas*, I got a surprise--a gift. The first stroke was wetter than I had meant it. When the brush hit the canvas, a different "voice" spoke. The paint was thin enough to blend under the brush, leaving some ochre, white, and red in the gray. Suddenly, the dynamic, churning, impasto I'd intended gave way to a faster, more subtle flow. This just seemed right, in physical feeling and in the idea of exploring how the river of time flows for all of us. As layer after layer built up, keeping alive the matrix of gray and adding in other hues on the brush, I would occasionally sgraffito back in with the brush handle tip—creating another flow with an additional sense of unknowable-ness. These flows have overtones of Philosophy, which realizes that ultimate reality underlies all phenomena, yet cannot be known. The quiet energy and pleasure of this was one of the joys of the work, along with creating a harmony between the flowing ground and the temporal

incidents of painter, swimmer, and universe. I painted the artist as exposed, alone, no hint of the stable social structure of Velazquez' time. I made him more confrontational, almost a bullfighter, trying to pierce the flow of our era and convey something of essential truth.

All this begs the question, "So what?" More specifically, will such a work as mine be well-received in an age apparently unfriendly to the traditions of Truth (Content) and Beauty (Form)? These principles are generally tossed aside in contemporary Art to serve to the artist's subjectivity and/or political ideology.⁴

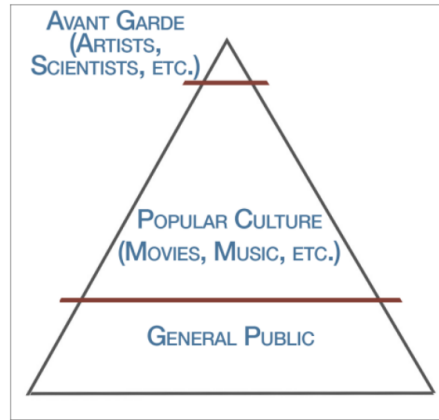
The categories of "art world" and "people" should not be as separate as they are today. Under today's establishment, work of "merely" visual quality (Truth and Beauty) does not get past the art establishment to be seen by ordinary folk. The art world's emphasis on using wealth, entertainment, and status to determine worth instead of visual quality alienates too many people.

To declare visual standards as unimportant gives great and undue status to those who subjectively determine what is important. Thus is created a high priesthood, speaking in jargon, which the rich buy into because of an arbitrary market while the rest cannot fathom.⁵

The two-thousand-year tradition of appreciating the True, the Good, and the Beautiful, is now considered out of touch by the general populace. But social commentary, installations, wealth, being in the know—all other considerations should revolve around the merit of the content and form (a concept that encapsulates all visible features of an artwork, such as color, line, shape and contrast): the Truth and Beauty of the work itself. However, the fashionableness of being snide about Truth and Beauty, playing it safe with irony, and using only wealth and status as benchmarks is reversible. A real democracy of art would have a language of consistent principles that all could use to discuss and debate what is beautiful and what is not.

The long-established art verities of Truth and Beauty would allow contemporary art to function again as something important to the well-being of the individual and the commonweal. Aristotle once claimed, "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular."⁶ While Aristotle was writing of poetry and drama, his principles can apply to Fine Art, too. Aristotle's connecting goodness, beauty, and truth is still applicable in our postmodern society, if not even more so.⁶

Kandinsky pointed out, in *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, that artists are people who have the time and inclination to discover new things, which then gradually filter into the general population. He noted, "The life of the spirit may be fairly represented in diagram as a large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost. The lower the segment the greater it is in breadth, depth, and area." The whole triangle is moving slowly, almost invisibly forwards and upwards. Where the apex was today the second segment is tomorrow; what today can be understood only by the apex, forms tomorrow the true thought and feelings of the second segment. "...In every segment of the triangle are artists. Each one of them who can see beyond the limits of his segment is a prophet to those about him, and helps the advance..." To overcome being relegated to the last page of entertainment sections, art should engage the viewer in deep looking, personally, communally, and aesthetically, hoping for a synthesis that brings together the various forces we encounter, so that a better world, for self and others, is created.



The accumulation of opinion and social capital on the top determines the artistic consumption of the public.

Crafting a harmony of idea and form, self and world, now and time, chaos and order was a great pleasure for me as an artist. It certainly is true that making a painting is a way of discovering more about the world--a downright joy in its struggle. In my painting, contrasted with Velazquez', the contemporary fluidity is a clear difference. The setting is not ordered but is rather flowing. The existential contemporary flow and the near infinite flow of the Cosmos can be diligently observed. Velazquez' *Las Meninas* is a painting about deep representation of the moment, and so is mine. All the things in my piece are "handmaidens" ("meninas") for those of us who live today.

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