

At the Prado

by Theodore Dalrymple (December 2016)



The most beautiful great art gallery in the world (to my taste) is the Prado in Madrid. By now I know it well enough to be able to go straight to my favourite paintings there, which gives me the same kind of consolation as reading a

favourite poem. Those are the paintings which never stale, at least for me, however familiar they become.

On my last visit to the Prado I was disappointed to discover that one of the paintings to which I have almost automatically had been removed from the walls and replaced by a much inferior painting by a lesser artist. I am not against the display of lesser artists in even the best galleries – they perform the valuable service of making the greatness of their superiors all the clearer – but I was sorry that it was ‘my’ painting that should have been sacrificed to a much inferior work.

The missing picture was Velázquez’s portrait of *El bufón don Sebastián de Morra*, the Jester don Sebastián de Morra. This achondroplastic dwarf is seated on the ground with his short legs before him; he wears a scarlet gown over his black suit of clothes. There was nothing of the jest in his expression (he was to die about four years after Velázquez painted him); he is bearded and stares out at the viewer with uncompromising intelligence and seriousness.

When I saw the painting for the first time, not having been aware of its existence before, I felt a sense of unease. As a child I had been taken to the circus; it was still the era in which lions and tigers were trained to jump through flaming hoops and dogs dressed in tutus went round in circles on their hind legs. Worst of all were the circus dwarves, who were deemed funny just by the way they ran round the circus ring as fast their short legs would carry them, harried and ridiculed by the ring-master. I remember, to my shame, that I laughed just like everyone else.

Sensibilities change with time, of course, and often for the better. Those who were excluded from being regarded as the proper objects of respect, concern or compassion suddenly become included. We are inclined to mock Jeremy Bentham for what appear to be his pedestrian and humourless thoughts, his ability to be pedantic and wrong at the same time, but when he wrote that the question with regard to our treatment of animals was not whether they could talk or reason but whether they could suffer, he said something that now seems to us perfectly obvious and that few would dispute, but that the time (1789) was far from being universally accepted.

Life always has its little ironies, of course. Recently in Brazil I saw a series

of advertisements on my way from the airport drawing attention to the cruelty meted out to farm animals. They showed such animals – a little lamb, for example – on their way to slaughter, with the slogan ‘I want to live.’ The irony here is that the animals would never have been called into being if it had not been for someone, or some group of people, who had not from the first wanted to slaughter them. Every spring I see the pretty baa lambs (to use the title of one of Ford Madox Brown’s famous pictures) gambolling in the fields not far from my house, and I ask myself whether it would have been better for them never to have been born than to face the fate that will probably be theirs. And does the suffering at the end of life that is the fate of a considerable proportion of mankind vitiate the previous pleasures of life, and render life as a whole not worth living? If only we could get our suffering over and done with early in our lives!

Velásquez’s great painting invites us (at the very least) to see what might not have been obvious in his own, very hard and cruel times, namely that dwarves are not to be dismissed or treated as intrinsically inferior or objects of amusement merely because of the stature and bodily peculiarities. But are we right to read into it don Sebastián’s humiliation? Might he not, if we had been able to ask him, have replied ‘It is all very well for you to sympathise with my plight and thus feel virtuous yourselves, but being a jester at the court of one of the mightiest monarchs in the world gives me at least an honourable and comfortable place in the world, at least compared to any possible alternative.’ And if we were to reply to this, ‘It is the world, then, that needs changing, it need to become stature-blind as it is supposed to be colour-blind,’ he might reply ‘That is all very well, but I cannot wait and have my living to earn, besides which who are *you* to tell *me* whether I am or ought to be humiliated?’

Still, I cannot but see the decline of the circus dwarf as a moral advance (so long as the chances of dwarves in other spheres have improved): though I am far from convinced that the current vogue for competitive games for the handicapped, watched by thousands or millions, will not strike our descendants (if we have any) as very different from how Victorian fairground freak-shows now strike us.

Great art is a template on which we examine our thoughts and emotions, though of course I do not wish to imply that it is merely thought- or emotion-provoking, for almost anything may in certain circumstances be those things. Proust’s madeleine was thought- and emotion-provoking, to put it mildly, but it was not

great art. The problem is that of all things beauty is the most difficult to write about, besides which it takes courage to reveal to others what one finds beautiful. Often one cleaves to received opinions for fear of disclosing too much about oneself.

On my latest visit to the Prado (as also on my previous two) I could not help but notice that no crowds gathered at the painting *El Coloso*, the Colossus, as they did around the Black Paintings by Goya nearby, and as they once would have done. This painting shows the dispersal in terror of people and cattle fleeing at the sight of a ghostly but aggressive giant that looms enormously, enigmatically and terrifyingly over the entire landscape; the whole is rather dark except for a few splashes of colour in the dress of the people fleeing.

For a long time the painting was attributed to Goya, and therefore everyone was permitted to find it great, even if its meaning was unclear (as is that of many of Goya's great works). But in 2008, the curator of the Prado announced that modern research had showed that it was not by Goya after all, but by a lesser associate of his (though still an artist of some merit), Asensio Julià. To this day the Prado stands by the new attribution, and the following note is placed beside the painting:

The uncertain, repetitive brushstrokes, the strident colours of the small figures and the dull illumination of both the landscape and the colossus, bear little resemblance to Goya's impeccable technique.

These arguments, however, are highly subjective and are far from universally accepted by art historians; indeed, the majority of such historians do not accept them, but continue to attribute the work – until 2008 considered a great one – to Goya.

The odd thing is that the doubt about the authorship of the work is sufficient to deter the crowds that would otherwise have gathered dutifully at the painting (it has been side-lined physically as well as by changed attribution, and is now by-passed by the crowds impatient to see the Black Paintings.) Before 2008, a year as fateful for its reputation as it was for that of Lehman Brothers, reverent crowds gathered round it as at a holy shrine.

Now those same crowds shun it as thing accursed. They no longer have permission, so to speak, to have exquisite feelings before it, nor are they required to

ponder its meaning because it has been declared to be the product of an inferior mind. No longer does anyone clasp a recorded commentary to his ear as he gazes at it. But of course the painting is what it is: if it was worth looking at until 2007, it was worth looking at after 2008.

No response to art, however, is entirely unsullied by preconceptions and one's own personal experience. In the Prado is a painting by Bronzino, the sixteenth century portraitist of the Florentine elite. His portraits, I think, have a certain clear-sighted ruthlessness about them. They are beautiful all right, but – to me at any rate – slightly chilling. And in the Prado is the most chilling of them all.

It is small and possibly unnoticed by most visitors. It is of Don Garcia de Medici, son of Cosimo de Medici, at the age of three (or possibly a year or two more). Its attribution to Bronzino is said to be uncertain because of the inferior quality of the painting of the infant's hands, particularly the right in which he holds a symbol of innocence, an orange flower.

But no one would take Don Garcia (or Garzia) for an innocent: quite the contrary, one would take him for an incipient psychopath, the kind of person who later in his career would gladly have had those around him poisoned in order to secure his power, he being only the third son of his father. The infant, chubby from rich food, is dressed in a red silk tunic laced liberally with gold, of an adult style different only in size from an adult's, and stares out defiantly, unblinkingly and already with no illusions about the world, upon the onlooker. His expression is distinctly nasty; it is that of an infant both petulant and calculating.

The picture lacks tenderness of any kind. It is a portrait of a young Machiavellian who expects as his due, but also has to scheme, to get his way. So young and yet so ruthless! The assumption generally is that Bronzino (or the worker in his studio) painted Don Garcia in this fashion because he took the supposedly pre-Enlightenment view of children, namely that they were adults, only smaller. Therefore, the lack of tenderness in the picture, which is as unsentimental as it is possible for a picture of a child to be, is the fault, or at least the consequence, of that pre-Enlightenment attitude to childhood. There was nothing in the child himself to call forth a lack of tenderness in the painter.

First, I am not sure I believe that childhood was ever conceived of small-scale adulthood, as some historians allege. Children were no doubt set very early to work, but that was from necessity rather than from any misconstruing of the psychology of children. But more importantly, I have seen many children aged three with the malign and calculating expression of Don Garcia. I worked for years in a prison and used to see the prisoners' infants coming to visit their father in the company of their mothers: and horrible to say, I saw on their faces the already-hardened look of Don Garcia. Whether psychopaths are made or born is no doubt a difficult question; but I have little doubt that a psychopathic environment brings forth psychopaths. Bronzino (or his studio worker) was recording what he saw, not what he failed to see.

Much as I love the Prado, I cannot remain in it for more than two hours at a time. I am supposed to be enjoying myself, not performing a sacred duty. Galleries soon tire me, and I realise that I am staying more to get my money's worth than appreciate the art that they contain. As I emerged from the Prado this time, I saw groups of tourists, under the flag of their leader, being herded in at the entrance, with expressions that make grim-visaged war seem positively light-hearted. I was reminded very forcibly of another great painting in the Prado, another of my favourites, *El triunfo de la muerte*, the Triumph of Death, by Pieter Breughel the Elder, in which (among much else) the skeletons of the already dead herd a crowd of the living into the tunnel of death.

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