

Minerva, Arachne and Marcel

Historians of art like to believe that they can solve the riddles of interpretation posed by masterpieces of old painting. Firm in the conviction that a great painting is endowed by its creator with a unique, unambiguous message, we struggle to recover that meaning through the use of textual and visual evidence. And, up to a point, the historical method can recover the forgotten aspects of works of art created centuries ago.

Las Hilanderas is proof of this assertion; for over two centuries, the subject was mistakenly identified as a view of women at work in a tapestry factory. Velazquez had painted the picture around 1658, for a friend named Pedro de Arce, a *funcionario* in the royal palace. By the early eighteenth century, the picture was believed to represent a scene from everyday life, “mugeres que trabajan en tapizeria.” With this description it is listed in the inventory of Luis de la Cerda, IX Duke of Medinaceli, who in 1711 surrendered it to the royal collection. By the end of the century, this interpretation of the subject had metamorphosed into an incontrovertible fact, as demonstrated by entries in the royal inventories, where it is called by the enduringly popular title, “*Las Hilanderas*”.

It was only in the twentieth century that the original and accurate identification of the subject began to be recovered, a process that required forty-five years to unfold. In 1903, the English critic C.R. Ricketts observed that the composition depicted on the tapestry hung on the rear wall was a partial copy of Titian’s *Rape of Europa*, now in the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, Boston, but formerly owned by Velazquez’ patron, Philip IV. (It had been acquired for the Spanish royal collection by Philip II.) Some years later, in 1940, Enriqueta Harris, the great English velazquista, identified the helmeted figure in the background as Minerva, who was gesturing toward Arachne. However, Harris believed that these two mythological

figures were woven into the tapestry, a misapprehension corrected in 1948 by the American scholar Elizabeth DuGue Trapier, who pointed out that all the figures in the small background space were standing in front of the wall hanging. As it happened, 1948 was the culminating year in the recovery of the original subject. Maria Luisa Caturla, the renowned archival researcher, published an inventory of the original owner, Pedro de Arce, which was dated 1664. In this inventory, the title of the painting is listed as the "fabula de aragne." Articles by Diego Angulo Iniguez (1948) and Charles de Tolnay (1949) definitively confirmed the identification of the subject as an illustration (a highly-original illustration) of a passage from Book VI of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. According to this venerable literary source, Arachne was a Lydian weaver who claimed that her skill exceeded that of Minerva. She was punished for her pride by being converted by Minerva into a spider, the scene that is about to occur in the background of Velazquez' painting.

Far from ending discussion of the painting, the retrieval of the subject opened a new chapter in the historiography of *Las Hilanderas*. Velazquez' composition is highly allusive and ambiguous. By virtue of his original conception of the antique text, the artist raises questions which both demand and frustrate attempts to answer them. Who are the women in the foreground? Who are the elegantly-dressed females who accompany Minerva and Arachne? Why did Velazquez reverse the logic of the composition, placing the climactic moment of the story in the distance instead of in the foreground? And what is the purpose of the quotation from Titian's *Rape of Europa*? By a cruel paradox, the correct identification of the subject only obfuscated the significance of this masterpiece.

It would be tedious to review and analyze in detail the myriad of interpretations that have been inflicted on *Las Hilanderas* over the last six decades. One proposes that the painting is a political allegory, another that it symbolizes the virtue of

prudence, another that it is Velazquez' claim that painting is a liberal art not a manual craft and that he, therefore, is entitled to noble status. Although they differ one from another, these interpretations do share a common trait. Their authors assert with the absolute conviction, on the basis of the assembled evidence, that they have unlocked the "secret" of this masterpiece. Unconsciously, however, they make the opposite point—that no single interpretation can possibly be sufficient. Although ambiguity is the sworn enemy of the historical sciences, it is a precious resource of artistic creation. *Las Hilanderas* is the validation of reception theory, which holds that the meaning of art works is altered as the expectations and presuppositions of viewers change over time and through circumstance. It also proves that multiple meanings need not be self-contradictory. Indeed, I would argue that a great work of art demands a multiplicity of responses if it is not to become mere illustration.

Elena del Rivero clearly has arrived at the same conclusion. Her appropriation of *Las Hilanderas* is incredibly witty and perverse. Interpretations of her deconstruction of the painting could go in many directions, for it is a richly evocative work. Allow me to speak of Elena's work in purely personal terms. I confess that when I first saw it, I nearly fell off my chair. My intense reaction exemplifies how meaning escapes the control of the artist, at least when the artist has not attempted to reduce significance to boring certainty. As my eyes scanned the image, I saw that Elena had invited an improbable intruder into the magical world of *Las Hilanderas*, none other than the most enigmatic, elusive artist of the twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp. Velazquez and Duchamp in the same imaginary space! They had, in fact, inhabited the space between my ears for decades.

I encountered Velazquez and Duchamp at approximately the same time, in the late 1950s, a formative moment in my life. I had the good fortune of belonging to a family in which art was an

obsession. My parents, Jean and Leonard Brown, were pioneering collectors of Dada and Surrealism, and Marcel Duchamp was a household god. My parents talked about him incessantly and in reverential tones. They regarded Duchamp as the most original artist of the twentieth century, and this at a time before his all-pervasive influence had become an acknowledged fact. My mother baptized him as "Leonardo Duchamp," which was her way of expressing the belief that Duchamp and Leonardo da Vinci were extraordinary polymaths endowed with an ability to look into the future. Furthermore, each had essentially abandoned the practice of painting to pursue interests which can only be called extra-artistic. My mother also discovered a parallel between Duchamp's *Green Box*, a strange assortment of sketches and writings related to his greatest work, the *Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even*, and the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci. In both cases, the workings of the artist's mind were presented as pieces of something larger that was never fully revealed. Duchamp was very pleased with the compliment and signed his print, the *Chessplayers*, with a dedication to my father: "From Leonardo Duchamp to Leonardo Brown." Chess was the obsession of Duchamp's later life, and he appears in Elena's version of *Las Hilanderas* in the midst of his most notorious game of chess, the one that took place in Pasadena on 18 October 1963, against his naked opponent, Eva Babitz. Marcel enters the world of Minerva and Arachne as a destabilizing presence. It is a move that Velazquez, the master of ambiguity, would have certainly approved.

Duchamp, of course, was still alive when his spirit possessed our household and my parents eventually came to know him in person. They would travel to New York from our home in the provincial city of Springfield, Massachusetts, and meet Duchamp at his gallery or in a restaurant. On one occasion sometime in the late fifties, I accompanied them and had the opportunity to shake his hand. I hardly knew what to say and therefore said nothing. This was a very impoverished response from someone who aspired to be a historian of art, and I have

tried to do better in my innumerable encounters with Velazquez. The first of these occurred in 1958, when, as a young student in Madrid, that I started my regular visits to the Museo del Prado, that shrine to the art of Velazquez, which would soon lead me to a career as a student of the master and of the Spanish Golden Age.

As I have mentioned, Duchamp and Velazquez are a most unlikely couple but they have been beloved inhabitants of my mental world. I see them as reticent artists, as brilliant critics of accepted modes of art-making, as cryptic analysts of accepted systems of beliefs and as masters of ambiguity, too respectful of art to bind it with the shackles of certainty. With brilliant insight, Elena del Rivero has brought them together in a way that seems completely natural, although it is obviously highly artificial. By collapsing the twentieth century into the seventeenth or, if you like, propelling the seventeenth into the twentieth, Elena's interpretation of *Las Hilanderas* invites us to ruminate on the art of two of the most subversive masters in the history of western art. As such, it claims a place of honor in the historiography of this masterpiece and the never-ending history of its reception.