

Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Volume 13, 2021

Edited by Vítor Moura and Connell Vaughan



Published by



Proceedings of the European Society for Aesthetics

Founded in 2009 by Fabian Dorsch

Internet: <http://proceedings.eurosa.org>

Email: proceedings@eurosa.org

ISSN: 1664 – 5278

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The European Society for Aesthetics



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***On Deconstruction and Construction in Picasso's
Las Meninas: Political Reasons for and Death
Exorcisms in the 1957 Barcelona Suite***

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ABSTRACT. On the tricentennial of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (1656–7), Picasso made a peculiar and titanic tribute to this historical masterpiece of Spanish painting, deconstructing it in a series of fifty-eight oil paintings between August 14 and December 30, 1957. We could reach a consensus in accepting – at least – that two creative processes are at play in Picasso's *Las Meninas*: (1) the deconstruction of the Velázquez's work in a series and (2) the construction of a total of 58 oil paintings that deserve to be appreciated qualitatively as a totality, an aspect to which I will refer using the term *suite*, which (like Goodman's word *variation*) I will borrow from the field of music. This article aims to explore the qualitative reasons of this *suite* as a totality, exploring its strategies of deconstruction of Velázquez's 1656-7 work and focusing on what I consider the political reasons of *Las Meninas* and Picasso's intimate relationship to death exorcism as the inner construction devices of the suite.

Introduction

In 1971, the American philosopher Nelson Goodman went to Barcelona. There, he discovered Gaudí's *Sagrada Família* (begun in 1882 and not yet finished), as well as Picasso's series *Las Meninas*. Goodman considered the latter work to be “the most impressive variations ever done in painting,” as he writes in his article “Variations on Variation – Or Picasso back to

³⁰ Email: Jessica.Jaques@uab.cat. This article has been realized with the support of the I+D Research Project PGC2018-097568-B-I00: *Los escritos de Picasso: textos poéticos 1935-1945* financed by the *Ministerio de Ciencia, Innovación y Universidades* in which the author is main researcher.

Bach ...” (1988).³¹

This critical judgment focuses on two issues that are present in this paper: the issue of the procedures of qualitative deconstruction inner to *Las Meninas suite* and the issue of the procedures of qualitative construction inner to *Las Meninas suite*. Either in deconstruction and construction creative processes I will follow Goodman's expansion of the use of the term *variation* from music to painting, and I will establish a gap between the notion of *variation* and the notion of *suite*, which provides a theoretical statement of the first term in the philosophy of painting, *variation* being considered from now on as an indirect mode of reference.

For the first creative process – that is, deconstruction – I will present a political reading of Picasso's *Las Meninas* in their contemporaneity with the tricentennial of Velázquez's work, and the use of Tv and cinematographic gazes. Next, for the second creative process – that is, construction – I will present the underlying reason for the creative procedure of the *suite* and also for the presence of it in its final location in the *Picasso Museum* in Barcelona. These reasons are the exorcism of two deaths: that of Picasso's father, José Ruiz y Blasco (who passed away in Barcelona in 1913), and that of Jaume Sabartés (who died in Paris in 1968).

Regarding the dating of the work, it should be noted that the *Las Meninas* series (MPB 70, 433–90) was done feverishly by Picasso probably between August 14 (the first oil in the series –MPB 70.433– dates from August) and December 30, 1957³², months after the tricentenary of the original painting. It was possible for me to establish the date of the inception of this series by pointing out the creative hybridization that Picasso exercised between it and the long poem *El entierro del Conde de Orgaz*, which was composed at the same time.³³

Picasso's *Las Meninas* is obviously an exercise in deconstructing the aura of historical painting or, in fact, of a historical painting, which is decomposed into fifty-eight oils on canvas. Some of these were, in my opinion, worked on simultaneously, even if finished on different

³¹ Goodman, Nelson, “*Variations on variation, or Picasso back to Bach*”, *Reconceptions in Philosophy, and other Arts and Sciences*. Cambridge (MA) : Hackett, 1988, p. 76. See also : Pérez Casanovas, Àger, «La variació com a experimentació : un apropament pragmatista a la creació simbòlica de Picasso», V Congrés Català de Filosofia, Canillo (Andorra), 20-22 June 2019 ; most of the thesis of this article are resumed in Rafart Planas, Claustre, «*Les Menines: Variations Picasso* », *Les musiques de Picasso*, Catalogue sous la direction de Cécile Godefroy, pp., 209–17.

³² See <http://www.bcn.cat/museupicasso/ca/colleccio/mpb70-433.html>

³³ See Jacques, Jèssica & Michael, Androula, “El Entierro del conde de Orgaz”, *Picasso Poeta*. Museu Picasso de Barcelona, Musée Picasso de Paris, November 2019, pp. 84–89.

dates, which are noted in each case by Picasso himself. Since May 1968, the series has been located in the Picasso Museum in Barcelona.

1. The *suite* as a Strategy of Deconstruction and the Political Reasons for Picasso's *Las Meninas*

Picasso's *Las Meninas* is a journey – a series fragmented into 58 moments – back and forth in time and space and it is this aspect that makes it a performative work.

We need to pause for a moment on the concept of *series* as such. Many languages have been able to translate *suite* adequately. A Bach suite is not a Bach series: *suite* connotes quality, *series* only connotes quantity. Picasso's *Las Meninas* is a *suite* and not a *series*, as are Goya's engravings. This means that once serialized, each element can transgress the serialization and be placed next to a non-correlative element, generating receptive events other than the initial ones and enabling the return from succession to simultaneity. The *suite* as a whole thus becomes an installation. As consequence, I suggest that chronological ordering should not be imperative (as it is now in the Picasso Museum), since combination according to the criteria of what could be called a *performative installation* (in my opinion, what Picasso was aiming at) can generate receptive experiences that are as or more fruitful than the original intentions and as rigorous as them. I would add that chronological recounting can even be damaging, as is the case for the *Portrait of Jacqueline* (MPB 70.489), which is currently “in exile” near the room of the sub-series *The Pigeons*. The spatial requirements of an institution are perfectly understandable, but, according to the criteria of the performative installation, the portrait plays the role of the mirror of the royal couple in the original painting (*The Portrait of Jacqueline* represents, indeed, a mirror which reflects “the queen” Jacqueline and “the king” Picasso, who is present only as a gloomy half-face) and “exiling it” condemns it to being displaced and performatively disempowered. Something similar could be said of the subseries *Els colomins* (MPB 70.450–8); but here subjection to the dictatorship of space is unavoidable since the subseries consists of nine oils, which, moreover, enjoy a certain autonomy that softens the receptive consequences of their “exile.”

Thanks to this <simultaneity – succession – simultaneity> round trip, Picasso's *Las Meninas* achieved in an undisciplined way something that critics have only wanted to

acknowledge in Duchamp's work: the transgressive exploration of the performative capacity of the traditional arts – in this case, of oil painting.

I will now turn to a little-known and highly surprising article by Michael Foucault, who explored this transgression in 1973. Foucault was the author of the first text in history that was dedicated to art – specifically to *Las Meninas* by Velázquez – and served as a prologue to a book of philosophy (see, respectively, “Les suivantes” – written in 1964 – and *Les mots et les choses* [1966]). He also wrote some reflections on Picasso's suite that were supposed to serve as a film script: reflections that are based precisely on the game of <simultaneity – succession – simultaneity>. It is worth mentioning that the text is entitled “*Les ménines* de Picasso” and that the film could not be made, since the footage that filmmaker Guy de Chambure managed to shoot at the Museu Picasso in Barcelona was confiscated by the censorship of the Franco regime. It should be remembered that Picasso's *Las Meninas* series was exhibited at the Louise Leiris Gallery, between May 22 and June 27, 1959, and that Foucault may only have seen them there and not necessarily installed in Barcelona.

Let us now return to the deconstruction of the historical painting. One of the ways to achieve this is to try to transmute the simultaneity proper to it into the form of succession. Picasso had learned to free images from the weight of simultaneity thanks to his work as an engraver. Engraving and series are two terms with a strong historical relationship that link Picasso to "his Goya" and "his Rembrandt." On the other hand, as Nelson Goodman detected when he discovered Picasso's *Las Meninas* on his trip to Barcelona in 1971 (it is worth mentioning that Goodman regarded this Picasso series as "the most imposing variations" in the history of art), the practice of variation is akin, by nature, to serialization, and hence Picasso did not hesitate to explore the serial procedure in his research from 1954 to 1963 on Delacroix (in the series *Les Femmes d'Alger*; 1954-5), on Velázquez (in the series *Las Meninas*) and Manet (in the series *Dejeuner sur l'herbe*, 1959-62).

I will argue that the fundamental reasons underlying the creative process of deconstructing Velázquez's *Las Meninas* are political and that Picasso transforms the *speculum principis* that configures Velázquez's *Las Meninas* (a literary genre which, as I understand it, is one of the structuring devices of the artwork) into a funhouse mirror in which he is able to emphasize the shortcomings of the future monarchy of Spain. Franco had already established this future monarchy by way of the *Law of Succession*, which was promulgated more than a

decade before Picasso's series (on March 31, 1947). Twenty years after painting *Guernica*, the *Las Meninas* series constituted a denunciation of the dark continuity of Franco's dictatorship in the form of a monarchy appointed by the dictator himself.

Let us have a closer look at the series. As I have said, it consists of fifty-eight oil paintings and was completed on December 30, 1957. Jaume Sabartès, in writing the introductory text, said that this was the manifestation of a deep desire for “New Year, new life”, in my opinion with an ironic and angry political tone. Picasso, director of the Museo del Prado (in exile) in 1937 and curator of the arrival of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* in Switzerland to protect them during the Civil War, recalled by way of the similarities between *Guernica* and the first oil in the series (MPB 70.433) – gray and the largest canvas he painted after the immense oil of 1937 – that the political situation had not fundamentally changed in Spain since the year in which he painted his anti-Franco *manifesto* for the Pavilion of the Spanish Republic at the Universal Exhibition of Paris. Moreover, he remained deeply committed to the efforts made by "the Spanish people" to "save Spanish art" during the Civil War, standing by the statements and commitments he made during the period of his leadership of the Prado Museum. This is why on the first page of *The Burial of the Count of Orgaz* (written on January 6 – the Feast of the Epiphany – in 1957), he affirms:

evidentemente las cosas no están para desnudos y escaparates ni en museos ni grandes almacenes de modas - porque es así.

most likely things here aren't meant for nudes and showcases not in museums nor the larger fashionable boutiques – because that's the way it is. ³⁴

Two decades after *Guernica*, the political landscape was largely hopeless: the monarchy of, as Luis Carrero Blanco put it, “the Catholic, anti-communist and anti-liberal Spain of the National Movement” had been announced in the *Law of Succession* of March 31, 1947. The future King Juan Carlos was nineteen in 1957 and had been appointed successor to the dictator Franco when he was nine. By way of a very peculiar rereading of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, Velazquez's kings were transmuted into festival giants in the *Las Meninas* series and their entourage into bigheads or jesters. Picasso continued to uphold the commitment he assumed and proclaimed

³⁴ Picasso, Pablo, *The Burial of Count Orgaz & Other Poems*, University of California Press: Eds. Jerome Rothenberg & Pierre Joris, Exact Change, 2004, p. 288.

in 1937, and he revitalized it with a work as gigantic as *Guernica* that involved an update of his critique of the Franco regime, which in 1957 was drifting towards monarchy.

Let us recall his best-known and sharpest statement regarding the political power of art, which he formulated in 1944 in the midst of World War II:

No! Painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of offensive and defensive war against the enemy.³⁵

Las Meninas de Velázquez was a work made in the royal court; those of Picasso were done in a voluntary, anti-Franco and communist exile (no matter how heterodox his communism was, like Sartre's, like Foucault's). In his words:

Have the Communists not been the bravest in both France and the USSR or in my Spain? How could I have hesitated? Fear of making a political commitment? On the contrary, I've never felt more free, I've never felt more whole! And then, I was in such a hurry to have a homeland again: I have always been in exile, and now I am no longer; while waiting for the time when Spain can finally welcome me, the French Communist Party has opened its arms to me; I have found in it all those whom I most respect: the greatest scholars, the greatest poets...³⁶

Finally, it is worth mentioning that, with their peculiar desire for a “new year, new life”, Picasso's *Las Meninas* restored the battle for two dissolutions: that of a political regime and that of a visual regime.

2. The Series as a Deconstructive Procedure Using Television and Cinematographic Devices

In *Las Meninas*, Picasso uses TV images and photograms as a pictorial device for

³⁵ Presented by Tery, Simone in the interview “Picasso n'est pas officier dans l'armée française”, *Lettres Françaises*, Paris, 24 març 1945, p. 5, also presented by Bernadac, Marie-Laure., Michael, Androula, *Picasso. Propos sur l'art*. Paris : Gallimard, 1998, p. 45.

³⁶ Picasso, Pablo, “Pourquoi j'ai adhéré au parti communiste”, *L'Humanité*, Paris 29-30 october 1944. Also presented by Bernadac, Marie-Laure., Michael, Androula, *Op. cit.* p. 41. About Picasso's peculiar communism, Utley, Gertje, *Picasso. The Communist Years*. New Haven & London: Harvard University Press, 2010, and Cohen-Solal, Annie, *Un étranger nommé Picasso*. Paris, Fayard, 2021.

deconstructing Velazquez's original painting. While Velazquez painted his *Meninas* in 1656-7, following my aforementioned interpretation, through the optical device of a huge out-of-canvas mirror, Picasso deconstructs the Sevillian master's work by way of two optical devices proper to the mass media culture of his time: the television screen and the cinematic frame.

This strategy is made manifest in two aspects of the 1957 series. Firstly, some television screens appear in Picasso's *Las Meninas*. As a matter of fact, he was a regular television viewer, and autumn 1957 was a peak time for televised events, especially because of the raging space race since the first two Russian *Sputnik* launches. As a matter of fact, I bet that the dog in the screen in the oil on canvas MPB 70.445, who makes the ears of Picasso's Teckel (Lump)³⁷ perk up, is none other than Laika, the female dog who died in space on November 3, 1957. The painting was done on September 4th, so we can assume that Laika was added to the TV screen later.

Secondly, Picasso was a cinemagoer as well, and even an everyday life filmmaker (and photographer) himself.³⁸ He was fascinated by the simultaneity in cinematic images that the succession of frames permitted. This is why cinematic devices allow Picasso to prioritize succession in his series as opposed to Velazquez's simultaneity.

As mentioned above, Foucault cinematically explored Picasso's *Las Meninas*, writing what, according to the filmmaker he commissioned, Guy de Chambure, are "essentially literary texts that indicated the spirit in which the script would be treated." It is illuminating for the question before us to review the moments on which it is based. The basic plot is given by the first title, "I. *La Desaparition du peintre*", which explains the appearance of the other moments and the successive tone: the painter disappears in the series until he is nothing more than an absence in tension with the resounding presence of the artist in Velázquez's work. The simultaneity of the gaze, from the succession of the first "menina" to the last, gives the following titles: "II. The Growth of the Musician", III. "The Transformation of the (Chromatic) Sentence", "IV. Dance and Metamorphosis". as the place where, definitively, succession and simultaneity find the perfect tension in dance, in the movement of music, which, moreover, has no face, thus inviting us to give it ours and "dance" *Las Meninas*:-

Curiously, for the 2017 Picasso Congress, the choreographer Laura Vilar – with whom

³⁷ About "Lump", see Duncan, Douglas, *Lump. The Dog who Ate a Picasso*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2006.

³⁸ Baldassari, Anne, *Picasso, Picasso and Photography: The Dark Mirror*. London: Flammarion UK, 1997.

I carry out artistic research projects – and I proposed to the Museu Picasso in Barcelona a study on the choreographic movement that is implicit in the tension of succession–simultaneity in Picasso's *Las Meninas*. Her starting point was the suggestion that this figure was that of a girl in motion and metamorphosis. At the time, we still did not know Foucault's text. Its discovery has reinforced our commitment to this line of research and will have a strong impact on her doctoral thesis. I owe the suggestion that Picasso makes the painter disappear and focuses on the girls to Laura Vilar and the playwright Sílvia Galí because ten years before he had written *Les quatre petites filles* (the second play in the history of theater starring only women, which I translated into Catalan and Spanish), where he already presented the stereotype of the girl (the girls) as the regent of the future of humanity. Twenty years after *Guernica*, the girls of *Las Meninas* worked hard to deconstruct the history of Spain in order to defeat Francoism and artistically found a Spain free from its yoke.

3. The *Suite* as a Construction Strategy and the Exorcism of the Death of Don José

Picasso's *Las Meninas* is a series quantitatively speaking (i.e., it consists of a set of more than four paintings), but it is also something else: the quantity of oil paintings that it includes has a qualitative value, since there are fifty-eight, because, as Sabartés has pointed out, they are a way of wishing “New year, new life”. A wish voiced at the end of December 1957, despite the political situation indicated in the previous section. But this is not the only thing that allows us to consider the series' constructive dynamics beyond its deconstructive mechanisms. The constructive impulse that led Picasso to carry out *Las Meninas* emerges, as far as I am concerned, from the fact that he was the same age as his father was when the latter passed away (75 years old). From this point of view, the dynamics of excess performed in this series are a way of exorcising his desire to surpass the age at which his father dies and the challenge of so doing. Death's exorcism was a recurring creative process for Picasso (recall, for example, the incidence of Apollinaire's death – which took place in 1918 – in the sign language of a decade later). This dimension will be further developed in what follows.

Picasso's fear of death is well known, and some of his masterpieces serve (among other things) as ways of exorcising it. This fear must have had one of its fiercest moments when

reaching the age of Don José Ruiz when he died. Picasso overcame his exorcisms by imposing titanic challenges on himself: such as he had already done in the cases of the *Portrait of Gertrude Stein* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), *Les Femmes d'Alger* (MoMA, New York), and *Guernica* (Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, Madrid). *Las Meninas* also involved an obvious Faustian motivation for the cited reason. This intimate dimension of the series was firmly intertwined, in my opinion, with the radical political motivation I set out above.

4. The Exorcism of Jaume Sabartés' Death as the Reason for the Definitive Location of Picasso's *Las Meninas* in the Picasso Museum in Barcelona

After eleven years during which he did not choose their ultimate destination, in 1968 Picasso gifted his *Meninas* to the Picasso Museum in Barcelona. This gesture also constituted a kind of exorcism: this time of the death of Jaume Sabartés, *factotum* of the museum, and the closest friend of the artist since their shared youth in Barcelona, as well as a companion of Picasso's life and work. After Sabartés's death, Picasso donated the series on the condition that the totality of the fifty-eight paintings would never be replaced or split up. This donation was therefore an exorcism in the form of homage and expression of gratitude to his friend and to the city that had brought them together. This decision endowed Picasso's *Las Meninas*, many years after its realization, with another strong qualitative dimension (as *suite*), since today it remains the only one of Picasso's series which can be viewed in its entirety in one museum, thus confirming exorcism and homage as underlying creative reasons for the series and empowering the creative agency of the act of placing it at the museum. It is not for nothing that the series is located in the walls built on *Sabartes' Square*, thus highlighting Picasso's umbilical link between the creative act and the power of friendship.³⁹

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Baldassari, Anne (1997), *Picasso, Picasso, and Photography: The Dark Mirror*. London: Flammarion UK.

³⁹ See Cortadella, Margarida (Ed.) (2018), *Sabartés per Picasso per Sabartés*. Barcelona, Fundació Museu Picasso.

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