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THE FRICK COLLECTION

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FRICK COLLECTION ANNOUNCES RETURN TO PUBLIC VIEW OF TREATED AND EXAMINED VELÁZQUEZ PORTRAIT



Velázquez, *King Philip IV of Spain*, 1644, oil on canvas, 51 1/8 x 39 1/8 inches, The Frick Collection, photo: Michael Bodycomb

One of the most beloved paintings in New York's Frick Collection, Velázquez's *King Philip IV of Spain* has returned to view after an absence of several months. The portrait was cleaned and treated for the first time in over sixty years with astonishing results. Technical studies of the painting were done for the first time and involved microscopy, X-radiography, and infrared reflectography. The work was undertaken during the summer and fall of 2009 by Michael Gallagher, Sherman Fairchild Conservator in Charge of Paintings Conservation at The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Comments Colin B. Bailey, The Frick Collection's Associate Director and Peter Jay Sharp Chief Curator, "the results of this treatment and examination are nothing short of a revelation. Multiple layers of dull and discoloured varnish have been removed, making clear for the first time in decades the extraordinary virtuosity and sureness of Velázquez's technique, and the subtlety and sensitivity of his composition. We now more fully appreciate the turn of the figure's shoulder, the weight of his costume, and the penetration of his gaze. The previous, rather flat appearance of the painted surface also made it impossible to fully appreciate the artist's peerless use of impasto brushwork. With this cleaning completed, the painting has been brought back to life, and we very much encourage visitors to come and take a fresh look at one of Velázquez's greatest portraits." *King Philip IV of Spain* is currently on view in the Frick's Oval Room, hanging in the exact spot

where viewers first encountered it in 1935, when the museum first opened to the public. In the coming year, various aspects of the portrait's execution, the interventions it has experienced over time, and various discoveries made during its recent treatment will be the subject of a focus exhibition at the Frick.

PAINTED WITH LIVELY BRUSHWORK IN JUST THREE DAYS

This dazzling canvas, purchased by Henry Clay Frick in 1910, is the last of Velázquez's formal portraits of the king and is the best-documented of these works. In 1640, the principality of Catalonia in northern Spain revolted against the authority of the crown and allied itself with France. French troops occupied the territory, and during the following years, Philip led his armies into the field to repulse the invaders. One of these campaigns took place in 1644. That February, the king, accompanied by a personal retinue of five hundred, left Madrid for Aragon. Among those in the group was Velázquez, whose presence was required, presumably, to record and commemorate the victories to come. The army was in Lérida, the gateway to Catalonia, by May. Led by the king, the troops captured the nearby town of Fraga, from which the siege of Lérida was launched. It was in Fraga that Velázquez was charged with painting the image of the sovereign, dressed in a costume he is known to have worn in the field. A makeshift studio was hammered together by the royal carpenters, who also made an easel at which Velázquez created the portrait that June. According to period documents, he needed only three days to finish the job. At the end of the month, the portrait was crated and sent to Madrid, where it was displayed publicly to celebrate the fall of Lérida to the Spanish army.

In keeping with the sober traditions of Spanish Hapsburg portraiture, this portrait says little about the event it commemorates. Only the commander's baton held in the king's right hand signifies the army's recent victory. The brilliance of the costume is, itself, a subtle indication of the celebratory character of the image. Furthermore, the execution of the silver brocade offers a perfect example of Velázquez's mature technique. By using irregular but carefully calibrated daubs of white, grey, and what now appears to be a lavender-toned mixture of pigments, Velázquez suggests the fleeting play of light and shadow over the garment's embroidery. Except for the head of the king, which is very finely painted, the rest of the surface is dematerialized by the restless brush of an artist who relies on the workings of the eye of the viewer to complete the forms and patterns he suggests in paint.

CONSERVATION HISTORY AND A HINT OF RECENT DISCOVERIES

The painting by Velázquez (visible in the background of the posthumous portrait of Henry Clay Frick below) last underwent a cleaning and restoration by conservator William Suhr in the summer of 1947. It was sent in the summer of 2009 to the Sherman Fairchild Paintings Conservation Center at The Metropolitan Museum of Art because multiple layers of varnish and wax had rendered the surface slick and dull. Also, as a result of a general discoloration of the varnish, the once-lively handling was obscured, and the surface of the portrait appeared flat and lifeless, diminishing the work's dazzling painterly effects. Removal of the old layers of varnish during cleaning has transformed the work, opening up the space, returning a greater sense of volume to the figure, and revealing the extraordinarily virtuoso handling of paint. The dramatic result of the treatment owes much to the fact that the paint layer below the old varnishes had remained in excellent condition, still retaining a marvelous variety of surface.



Sir Gerald Kelly (English, 1879–1972), *Portrait of Mr. Frick in the West Gallery*, 1925, oil on canvas. 48 x 40 in. Frick Art & Historical Center. Pittsburgh, PA

This rare period of treatment off-site offered the opportunity to examine the painting technically as never before. It was studied using microscopy, X-radiography, and infrared reflectography, which substantiated the painting's suspected complex history. At an early stage the painting appears to have been extended with canvas strips which were later removed. The left and right edges were once used as the tacking margins to attach the painting to a narrower stretcher, and at some point more than an inch of the bottom edge of the original composition was cut away. As these and other findings are further considered by curators at the Frick in preparation for an illuminating presentation of the painting next year, *Philip IV* has returned to view, and the public is now invited to enjoy this masterpiece anew.

BASIC INFORMATION

General Information Phone: (212) 288-0700

Website: www.frick.org

E-mail: info@frick.org

Where: 1 East 70th Street, near Fifth Avenue.

Hours: open six days a week: 10am to 6pm on Tuesdays through Saturdays; 11am to 5pm on Sundays. Closed Mondays, New Year's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, and Christmas Day. Limited hours (11am to 5pm) on Lincoln's Birthday, Election Day, and Veterans Day.

Admission: \$18; senior citizens \$12; students \$5; "pay as you wish" on Sundays from 11am to 1pm

PLEASE NOTE TO YOUR READERS: Children under ten are not admitted to the Collection.

Subway: #6 local (on Lexington Avenue) to 68th Street station; **Bus:** M1, M2, M3, and M4 southbound on Fifth Avenue to 72nd Street and northbound on Madison Avenue to 70th Street

Tour Information: included in the price of admission is an Acoustiguide Audio Tour of the permanent collection. The tour is offered in six languages: English, French, German, Italian, Japanese, and Spanish.

Museum Shop: the shop is open the same days as the Museum, closing fifteen minutes before the institution.

Group Visits: Please call (212) 288-0700 for details and to make reservations.

Public Programs: A calendar of events is published regularly and is available upon request.

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For further press information, please contact Heidi Rosenau, Head of Media Relations & Marketing, or Alexis Light, Media Relations & Marketing Coordinator

Media Relations Phone: (212) 547-6844

General Phone: (212) 288-0700

Fax: (212) 628-4417

E-mail address: mediarelations@frick.org