

## II. Through Beauty We Arrive at Freedom

*Juan De Pareja Met Exhibit*

# Portrait of the Artist as a Free Man

by Dennis Speed

*This article, written for July 4th, 2023, cites an exhibit (now closed) at the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its broader relevance to ongoing world developments makes pertinent its publication now.*

“I beseech you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice... And be not conformed to this world; but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind...”

*Paul, Epistle to the Romans, chapter 12, 1-2*

Though the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art’s recent exhibit<sup>1</sup>, “Juan de Pareja: Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Velázquez,” was marred by the too-familiar now-pervasive, irritating, “trending” contemporary proclivity to assault visitors and audiences with post-modernist editorialization (in the form of picture captions and ostensibly “helpful” audio commentary), it was an otherwise well-crafted presentation of selected masterpieces, created by two important 17th-Century painters, one the greatest artist of the Spain of his time, with an historically unique relationship. The exhibit provided direct access, for tens of thousands of people, to the power and beauty of the paintings themselves, and, in a sense, to the respective imaginations of the painters, both as individual artists and as collaborators, impossible to experience “on a screen.” This was framed, however, through an ironic lens, a simultaneously tragic and heroic setting. There, in the center of the exhibit, in a large, thick book,



Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velázquez

*Portrait of Juan de Pareja, 1650.*

were displayed the manumission papers issued by Diego Velázquez in Rome in November 1650, freeing Juan de Pareja from slavery.

Juan de Pareja, a slave inherited by Velázquez, became, despite the laws of Spain, a master painter. The exhibit tells a silent story of how Velázquez, a genius, saw genius that would not be shackled, and not only acknowledged it, but apotheosized it, in his portrait of Juan de Pareja, today one of the most famous paintings in all of Western art. The extraordinary relationship between the two painters, and the transformation of

1. David Pullins and Vanessa K. Valdés, *Juan de Pareja: Afro-Hispanic Painter in the Age of Velázquez*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2023.

not only that relationship, but the world of art in Spain, both by the Velázquez 1650 portrait, and by the later work of Pareja himself, particularly his [great](#) *The Calling of St. Matthew*, Is the implicit subject of the exhibit. The legend of how Juan secured his freedom to paint, is told by art historian Antonio Palomino (1655–1726):

Juan de Pareja, native of Seville, a dark-skinned mulatto, was the slave of Don Diego Velázquez. And even if his master (out of respect for the art) never allowed him to paint or draw, only to grind colors and do other practical things related to art or to maintaining the household, this troubled him so that secretly, forgoing hours of sleep, he succeeded in achieving in painting things most worthy of respect. In anticipation of his master’s displeasure, Juan de Pareja had recourse to an ingenious trick. He had noticed that each time King Philip IV came to watch Velázquez painting and would notice a painting upside down, he would turn it over, or have it turned over, so he could see what it represented. For this reason, seemingly inadvertently, Pareja leaned a small painting against the wall.

The king had scarcely turned it over when Pareja, who was awaiting this moment, threw himself at the king’s feet and begged him humbly to defend him in the face of his master, without whose consent he had learned the art and painted this painting with his own hand. This great and royal spirit did not limit himself to what Pareja asked of him but turned toward Velázquez and said: “Not only should you grant him pardon, but you should realize that anyone possessing such talent cannot be a slave.” And so, because of this noble action and his lofty thoughts, Pareja succeeded in distinguishing himself in Painting (despite the ill luck of his birth) to the point that he is worthy to see his own “life” in this book, because genius, talent, and elevated thoughts are the patrimony of the soul and souls are all the



Juan de Pareja

*“The Calling of St. Matthew,” 1661.*

same color and are all forged in the same great workshop. And this is even more so when a person creates his own fortune. Thus, Pareja, thanks to his own remarkable acts and his diligence, forged for himself a new being and a second and different nature.

Whatever one may think of the Palomino account, it makes two things clear: Juan de Pareja’s African ancestry, and the fact that slaves were not allowed to paint, just as in 19th-Century North America, it was forbidden to teach slaves to read. One other thing is clear. When Juan de Pareja returned with Velázquez to Spain from their 1649-51 trip to Italy as a free man, he subsequently established himself as a painter, with his own studio, commissions, and reputation, over the course of a decade. This could not have been done without the knowledge of King Philip IV of Spain, of whom Juan had completed a portrait in 1650, before his manumission (also included in the exhibit).

But what did it actually mean that the portrait of Juan de Pareja, even compared to Velázquez’s portrait of Pope Innocent X, is considered so exceptional? “To fully grasp what was at stake in this chain of events, we need to remind ourselves of the definition of the word ‘portrait’ current in Velázquez’s day,” says Victor Stoitichita, in his essay “The Image of the Black in Spanish Art: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries”: “an image that reproduces a person of high rank or importance,

whose effigy and likeness it is appropriate to preserve for future centuries.” Given this context, a portrait of a slave was, ideologically speaking, a paradoxical object that required immediate justification, especially as the painting in question gave no glimpse of the sitter’s social status. That is, there was no way for an observer to know what “stature” or “rank” Juan held, something that was often the very point of 17th-Century portraiture. It was iconoclastic, breaking the rules of 17th-Century practice. Who, therefore, was the man, the mind, with whom Juan de Pareja found himself associated?

### An Erasmian Conception of ‘Imago Viva Dei’

The writers of the exhibit do not point out the education that the young Velázquez received from circles descended from the far-flung educational network of Desiderius Erasmus (1467–1536). The painter under whom Velázquez apprenticed, Francisco Pacheco, had, in turn, been educated by his uncle, also named Francisco, Canon of the Cathedral of Seville. Jonathan Brown, in his essential book on Velázquez, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier*,<sup>2</sup> tells us, “For the sake of convenience, this group can be called Pacheco’s academy, but in fact it originally had been formed in the 1560s by the important Spanish humanist, Juan de Mal Lara, who, like many of his contemporaries, was a follower of Erasmus.”

Canon Pacheco, known for his extensive learning, together with two other individuals, was responsible for continuing the Erasmian influence in Seville, then Spain’s largest city at about 80,000 persons. While the Met exhibit focuses upon the freeing of Juan de Pareja by Velázquez in 1650, it does not ask the question: Did Velázquez, from the time of his own apprenticeship as a painter, and in his education by those influenced by the Christian humanist reformer Erasmus, have and manifest different ideas about human freedom? Velázquez is credited with having painted, at the age of eighteen, the first picture in Europe, not of an African, but of an African as the central figure in a composition, in his unique creation, *Kitchen Maid with the Supper at Emmaus*. This is a variation on the well-known story of the resurrected Christ appearing to some of his disciples in the town of Emmaus. No such kitchen maid figures in the original Biblical story. The picture is one of the earliest the artist makes, right at the time he sets

up his studio at the age of eighteen. It is a revolutionary act, using the then-popular genre painting of kitchen scenes, known as *bodegones*, for the most profound of messages. The woman, to whom Christ does not speak but to Whom she is listening most intently, is the central story of the portrait. The picture is often disparagingly simply called *Kitchen Maid*, and copies were made by Velázquez or his workshop on request, which omit Jesus and the disciples, changing the meaning—and the picture’s purpose—entirely. (There is also an *Adoration of the Magi* that dates from this same period, in which Velázquez has portrayed Balthazar, the Magus who accompanies Caspar and Melchior to visit the Christ Child, as a person of African descent, seated, while the other two kings kneel. He is dressed, not as a figure of Biblical times, but as a Spanish courtier.)

The latter, 57-year-old Velázquez of *Las Meniñas* (1656) is already present, if embryonically, in the much younger artist. It is this Velázquez, who overturned the “division” between the “vulgar” *bodegones* genre paintings and the portraits of nobility, in his rendering of Juan de Pareja. In that moment, in Spanish and other art, nobility no longer merely referred to a form, rank, or lineage, but to an internal state of mind externalized as an idea. No negative consequences were suffered by Velázquez, or Pareja, as a result. Why?

Pareja was the closest assistant to Velázquez in his travels to Italy. As Palomino indicated above, Pareja, during the trip to Italy, was, as usual, in charge of the preparation of the paints, including the creation of various hues and variations in color, a kind of “tuning” of the visual scale. By the time that the two arrived from other Italian cities to Rome in 1650, Pareja was already an accomplished, if not yet a great painter; one of the portraits of King Philip IV of Spain, contained in the central room of the exhibit, is definitely attributed to Juan—a matter of importance, since at the time it was, as we have said, essentially illegal to teach slaves of African descent how to paint. The two most powerful men in the Western world at the time were the Pope and King of Spain. Both Velázquez and Pareja had access to each of them for several hours at a time.

The Velázquez portrait of Juan caused an instant sensation among painters throughout Italy. Antonio Palomino tells us:

When it was decided that Velázquez should portray the Pontiff, he wanted to prepare himself beforehand by painting a head from life as an exercise. He made the portrait of Juan de Pareja, his

2. Jonathan Brown, *Velázquez: Painter and Courtier*. Yale University Press, 1986.

slave and a fine painter, which was so like him and so lively that when he sent it through Pareja himself to some friends for their criticism, they just stood looking at the painted portrait and at the original in awe and wonder, not knowing to whom they should speak or who would answer them.

About this portrait (which is half-length and done from life) Andreas Schmidt, a Flemish painter in the Court who was in Rome at the time, used to recount that, since for the Feast of Saint Joseph it was the custom to decorate the cloister of the Rotunda (where Raphael of Urbino is buried) with famous pictures, both ancient and modern, this portrait was hung there, and it received such universal acclaim that in the opinion of all the painters of different nations everything else looked like painting, this alone like reality. In view of which Velázquez was received as a Roman Academician in the year 1650.

“To fully grasp what was at stake in this chain of events, we need to remind ourselves of the definition of the word ‘portrait’ current in Velázquez’s day,” says Victor Stoichita, in his essay “The Image of the Black in Spanish Art: Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries.” He quotes Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco saying in 1674, “an image that reproduces a person of high rank or importance, whose effigy and likeness it is appropriate to preserve for future centuries.” Stoichita continues, “Given this context, a portrait of a slave was, ideologically speaking, a paradoxical object that required immediate justification, especially as the painting in question gave no glimpse of the sitter’s social status.”

When Juan de Pareja, in his self-portrait, painted 11 years later, portrays himself as present at the conversion of one of the four authors of the Gospel, he strikes a pose that can be positively compared to that of Velázquez’s 1656 *Las Meniñas*, sometimes referred to as “a revolution in a single painting.” Juan stares



Diego Rodríguez de Silva y Velázquez  
*“Las Meniñas” (Ladies in Waiting) of the Infanta, daughter of Philip IV, 1656.*

out from the canvas, present at the moment that Jesus has called Levi the tax collector, and the “divine spark of Reason” grips Levi such that from that moment on, “in the twinkling of an eye,” he will be forever changed. We will know him as Matthew, one of the four evangelists of the New Testament. Juan is dressed in contemporary fashion, but as a Spanish nobleman, a status he could not have possibly held, apparently, due to Spain’s strict social status laws. Juan holds papers in his hands, as though we are to see them, and which hold his name and the date of the painting. They are his own manumission papers, gained, like his nobility status, from the power of his sovereign, creative efforts. In both the Velázquez *Las Meniñas* self-portrait, and in Juan de Pareja’s self-portrait at *The Calling of St. Matthew*, we are shown two expressions of “the portrait of the artist as a free man.”

## Arturo Schomburg: The Art of Historical Discovery

The fact of the Met's having combined many works by the two artists (along with Murillo and others) into a single show—something never before done—and in such a way as to make the little-known Pareja's work accessible to an American mass audience for the first time, would be noteworthy enough.

The Met's curators added, however, a crucial, insightful dimension, lifting the exhibit above the limits of the perfunctory world of momentary, even if important, "museum experience," to something else. They emphasized, by including an exhibit room that held none of the works of Velázquez, or Juan de Pareja, but those of someone else, not an artist, filled with books, photographs, and magazine articles, the underlying reason for the exhibit. This individual played a crucial, if indirect, role in the bringing about of this very exhibit, 85 years after his own death. He was an important American intellectual, a "hidden figure" who died in 1938, the self-trained historian and bibliophile Arturo (Arthur) Schomburg. Schomburg was a seminal figure of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, and the founder of the collection that gave birth to the world-renowned Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. It was Schomburg who brought to the grateful attention of his contemporaries, a century ago, Juan de Pareja's very existence, and his importance for the history of Spain, and art. In doing this, Schomburg positioned the long-dead and largely forgotten Juan de Pareja to act as the same kind of inspiration to 20th-Century African-American and Hispanic intellectuals as Frederick Douglass acted for poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar in the 19th Century.

Given the decline in the teaching and appreciation of Classical culture, more should have been done by the city's institutions to feature this exhibit. In a society devoted to war, however, the mind is devalued, and the minds of the poor come last, if at all. This need not stand, especially as nations throughout the continent of Africa are joining to reclaim their rights from impoverishing



New York Public Library  
*Arturo Alfonso Schomburg (1874-1938), a seminal figure of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, who brought attention to the existence of Juan de Pareja.*

Pareja, and others. These higher principles of scientific and artistic creativity, not any resort to lesser tactics of any partisan variety, are an option that can be accessed under the worst of circumstances by those who find the courage and perseverance to act with genius in the most difficult of circumstances, even including slavery.

Now, when *The New York Times* make fun of the Moon landing of Chandrayan-3 at the lunar South Pole, portraying India as a man with a cow, knocking on the door of the prestigious "space club" (to which the British themselves do not belong), the right, agapic response to racism of this type, in this time of the ascendancy of the oppressed around the world, is to discover and celebrate those world-class figures from all cultures who demonstrate that true freedom is a sacred choice that requires, and inspires genius. That is the portrait that Velázquez actually made of Juan de Pareja, of himself, and of us.

Western neocolonial policies. In Lyndon LaRouche's "[Politics As Art](#)" as well as "The Science of the Human Mind"<sup>3</sup> one finds luminary guides for how to think in this time of crisis. Contrast the summary, dehumanizing failure of post-1900 culture, a failure which produced two world wars and could produce a third, to the intellectual/emotional "road less travelled" which is also, and equally available, to be taken—that narrow path which is expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the 1984 Schiller institute adaptation of it, the Declaration of the Inalienable Rights of Man.

Now, in the aftermath of the just concluded Johannesburg summit of the BRICS nations (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), it is an appropriate time to call attention to Diego Velázquez, Juan de

3. "The Science of the Human Mind: A Treatise on Fundamentals," by Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., October 15, 1983, was published in *The Campaigner*, Special Supplement, February 1984. This 48-page treatise will soon be available to the public online at "The LaRouche Library."