

## THE PORTRAIT ART OF HERNÁN CORTÉS MORENO JONATHAN BROWN

Several months ago, I was in Salas de Velázquez del Museo del Prado when I unexpectedly encountered Hernán Cortés, who was making one of his periodic visits to study the consummate portraits of the "rey de los retratistas españoles". Hernán and I had a brief chat, after which we resumed our separate scrutiny of Velázquez's masterpieces.

At the time, I thought nothing of our meeting, except that it had been a pleasure to encounter a friend unexpectedly. After all, Velázquez has been a powerful source of inspiration to painters for over four centuries, and his continuing popularity in our epoch is attested by the numerous works inspired, above all, by *Las Meninas*. Nothing could be more logical that to meet a contemporary portrait painter in the Salas de Velázquez del Prado. However, as I look back on that day, I realise that Cortés had been concentrating his attention on the portraits, and this was remarkable. Whereas *Las Meninas* has become an icon of post-modernism, the single-figure portraits by the artist are all but ignored except, of course, by Hernán Cortés.

The lessons learned by Cortés from the great master of the seventeenth century are not necessarily obvious; they have been internalized and re-interpreted. Thus a few observations may be necessary to bring them to surface. Perhaps most striking is the construction of pictorial space and the placement of the *retratado* within it. Velázquez consistently favored the use of a very shallow space with a neutral background. By means of this strategy, the sitter is presented to the viewer with compelling directness.

Another aspect of many of Velázquez's portraits and those of Cortés is the limited range of colors, the result of which is to concentrate attention on the sitter's face, the focal point of all portraiture. This leads me to observe another trait shared by the two portraitists, the restrained emotionality of the sitters. Twentieth-century portraiture is founded on the Romantic conception of the portrait as a mirror of the soul. Cortés, like Velázquez, avoids extremes of emotional rethoric; both artists prefer to provide clues to the sitter's personality rather than aggressive assertions of character that leave little space for engagement and interpretation.

The similarities noted here between these two painters from Andalucía can be considered as structural; they support the images and thus are easy to overlook. What meets the eye are the *hombres y mujeres ilustres de la España actual*, whose faces are known to us from their frequent appearance in the press and on television. In fact, it is very familiarity that poses the most challenging problem for the contemporary portraitist because the familiar runs the risk of becoming banal. Furthermore, the painted image, executed over time with study and art, can appear frozen and unnatural to eyes accustomed to perceiving the events and personalities of the world through the frenetic eye of a television camera.

Cortés has solved this problem in a highly original way –he uses the photographic camera to make preliminary studies. I vividly remember the session when I posed for my portrait. For more than four hours, Cortés took photo after photo as I sat and stood in different positions. Looking at the finished portraits with this experience in mind, it becomes possible to see how Cortés appropriates many of the characteristic features of the photograph to animate his portraits—the arbitrary truncation of the body by the frame (Javier Solana and, most dramatically, Javier Pérez Rojo); the off-center placement of the figure (Jesús Polanco); the view from below (Cándido Velázquez Gaztelú); the momentary distraction of the sitter's attention (Bernardo Cremades). These photographic sessions are also extended conversations which permit Cortés to draw acute psychological conclusions about the sitter's personality and, even more important, about the sitter's self-image. I mentioned before that Cortés avoids the excesses of emotional rethoric and instead subtly implies the personality traits of his sitters. Like Velázquez, Cortés is a reticent spectator of the human race and uses small, telling gestures to convey the psychological essence of his subjects. In the Portrait of Jesús Polanco, we see a successful man of affairs wielding power through the telephone, an instrument which functions in this scenario like the twentieth-century equivalent of a royal scepter. He purposefully dials a number that will put him into contact with one of his vast network of powerful friends and associates. The Portrait of Javier Solana represents this famous statesman standing in a slight slouch, hands in his pockets, thus capturing the rumpled image cultivated by one of the most prominent public figures of the late twentieth century. His button-down shirt, an American fashion, and his tie, which needs to be pulled tighter around the collar, provide other hints of the disarming informality that is a dominant feature of his personality.

The complex texture of Cortés's portraiture is best observed in the Portrait of the Infanta Cristina. The Infanta is situated in an ambiguous space, strongly reminiscent of Velázquez's Pablo de Valladolid. However, this is not the feature that catches the eye. Rather it is the astounding informality of the Infanta –the relaxed pose and expression, the wrinkled, everyday costume, the sneakers worn without socks, the absence of any ornament except a wristwatch and a few items of inexpensive jewelry. In this unforgettable portrait, Cortés provides a brilliant insight into one of the secrets of the monarchy's success. The royal family is elevated above us by history but not by comportment. Velázquez would not have shared this conception of the Spanish monarchy, but he certainly would have admired the efficacy with which this portrait conveys its message.