

Xavier Bray - Two portraits of Prince Baltasar Carlos

XAVIER BRAY: Hello. My name is Xavier Bray. I'm the Director of the Wallace Collection. The Wallace Collection is one of the greatest collections in central London, that was amassed by a family of collectors in the 19th century. They bought paintings, sculpture, arms and armour, and many other things, which are all here. It's free and it's worth a visit.

And today, I am going to tell you about one of my favourite painters, Diego de Velázquez, a Spanish painter who worked in the 17th century for a king called Philip IV. And I'm going to be talking about these two pictures behind me of the king's son, Don Baltasar Carlos.

Velázquez was born in Seville in southern Spain at the end of the 16th century but was one of those prodigious artists who, very early on in his career, demonstrated an incredible ability to paint the world around him in a very realistic manner. And he particularly excelled in portrait painting. And he attracted the attention of the young King Philip IV and was invited in the 1620s to Madrid to become his personal court painter.

Although Velázquez was doing really well at the court of Philip IV, he realised that in order to really sort of excel as an artist, he had to make a trip to Italy. And, indeed, in 1629 Velázquez travelled to Venice to study the art of Titian, the great Venetian artist. He then went to Rome to look at antique sculpture and to meet contemporary painters.

And it was while he was having a great time that he was called back by the king of Spain to paint his recently born son, Prince Baltasar Carlos, who was the heir apparent. And the king wanted new images of this young prince that was going to take over, eventually, the Spanish throne. Let me show you these portraits in detail.

So when Velázquez returned from Italy, he was very keen to try out his new technique, his new style of painting. And, in a way, you see it very clearly in these portraits. He picked up from Titian, especially, this idea that you could paint very quickly, very loosely, fabric.

And so when you get very close, for example, at this very beautiful robe that the young prince is wearing, which is made out of gold and silver filament that's been embroidered into it, he paints them with little flecks of paint. And when you get very close, it all breaks up, like a sort of impressionist painting. But when you take a step backwards, it all comes together and becomes almost like real fabric. And that's the sort of optical illusion that Velázquez had been able to develop and introduce and show off to the king in this painting.

The other thing he does is that he really paints this wonderful face of this young child, who was about three years old at the time. Very fresh looking, very beautifully polished style of painting. So there's this contrast of the polished head and the very impressionistic technique used for the costume. And then, just to add a touch of informality, he sort of ruffles the hair of the young child, so that he makes him very human, very approachable.

But don't be deceived. This is not a photographic family shot of a young boy. It's a portrait of the future leader of the Spanish armies. He is holding a baton, a baton of command that generals

would hold in battle. He's got the red sash of a captain general, and he's got a piece of armour, what we call a gorget, to protect his throat if in battle. And his hand is resting on the hilt of a sword, or on top of this wonderful costume, that some of you might think is a dress. But, actually, it's what young boys would wear until about the age of six or eight.

So what we have here is the future of Spain, a prince that will be trained in military strategy and military might and help his father to maintain the Spanish dominions, which at the time extended to the South Americas, to the Netherlands, and to Italy. It was one of the greatest powers in the world, and he is the hope for that Spanish might.

One of the wonderful things about Velázquez is the fact that he is able to respect formality, this is very grand portrait, and yet introduce touches of informality. I've referred to the ruffled hair, but the other thing that Velázquez does is the way that the prince has taken this hat off and laid it on that cushion to reveal his full face. So he's not hiding behind anything. It's a very direct image of this young prince, a very realistic portrait, which makes it very immediate to us as viewers.

And another thing that Velázquez does is that he doesn't just paint a one-off portrait of this young prince. He is interested in the sitter. He wants to see him grow up and record this young prince mature. And we are very fortunate here at the Wallace to have the portrait of him when he's learning to ride.

Here we have the prince a good six years later. He's probably 10 at this stage, where he is trained on a little sort of young pony type horse, doing what we call in French a 'levade'. He's doing a sort of lift up. But, of course, he's in total control. One hand holds the reins. The other one brings the arm against his waist. And he looks at you in a very calm fashion.

He has been made to pose in front of a group of people that are watching on. And then yet behind that is a building that is identifiable as the Buen Retiro Palace, the palace that was built by Philip IV in the 1630s. And that doesn't exist, really, any more but is now a park in central Madrid. But it's where the king would entertain, receive important ambassadors. And it's where, by the looks of it, Don Baltasar Carlos was being trained into his riding lessons.

But, also, if you look very carefully, there is a boy, or perhaps a dwarf, holding a lance, which he's about to hand to Don Carlos. And if you look again behind to the far right, you can see that they've lined up bits of canvas so that the horses can ride up and down and practise their jousting, which is effectively the art of war. His training as a military leader is well under way.

The really exciting thing about this portrait is the way it's been constructed. You do have this sort of traditional rider on horseback in full control. But it's the setting, this sort of sense that you are reliving a contemporary court life. On the far left, you have a dwarf pointing to the scene. So he's there to sort of show you in.

The court dwarves were constant companions, particularly to the prince. We know that he had several dwarves to assist him, to teach him, to make him laugh, to look after him. And one presumes that these are his sort of inner circle.

And then when you look back into the background, you'll see there's a carriage or what looks like a carriage, with people having conversations. And then there's a balcony. The way this is painted, it's very sketchy. This is Velázquez at his most sort of relaxed. He's experimenting with the brush.

And although it's hard to tell who is standing on that balcony, we do know from another version of this painting by Velázquez in a private collection that the king and queen are watching their son being trained. And not only that, but in this other picture there is a figure here of the prime minister of Spain called Olivares, who took it upon himself to teach the young prince how to ride. He really wanted to show to the king that he was the best person to educate his son.

And it's interesting that, in this picture, he's not there. Having said that, when you get really close to this picture and you look at it and you look at the canvas, the weave, the way the paint has been applied on the surface, you will see areas that look a bit ghost-like. And I wonder if Olivares is actually not underneath this picture.

And if you look very closely here, there is a form of a figure standing. And I would love to do one day a X-radiograph of this painting to see what lies beneath the surface. And I wouldn't be surprised if we could find other figures there, which in the end Velázquez decided to conceal in order to perhaps let us focus much more on the young prince, who of course is the main subject of this painting.

Because this painting is so sketchy and almost looks unfinished, some Velázquez scholars have doubted the attribution. They think it's by the workshop of Velázquez. I think it's time to re-evaluate that. The picture needs to be lightly cleaned to remove the dirt and the old varnishes, and I'm sure it will reveal a much more colourful picture.

And when you get close, you will see wonderful passages of paint in the plume, in the red sash, in the way he's sitting on that horse. Even the horse itself is full of life. And I'm pretty sure that we will bring back this picture to life by doing that. So that's something that is in the planning.

But in terms of the relevance of a painting like this today, we are all obsessed by our children, the schooling of our children. We all want them to do well. And, indeed, this is what Philip IV wanted from his son, a good education, so that he could take over the Spanish throne.

Unfortunately, it's a very sad ending to the story here. This young boy dies aged 16 while he was on military campaign with his father in northern Spain and he unfortunately contracts smallpox and perishes. And, of course, Philip IV was devastated, and it wasn't for another 20 years that he would have yet another son, and this time a son that was very, very ill, because Philip IV had been obliged to marry his niece. So there was a lot of intermarriage, and the son that came out from that marriage was not fit for purpose, as such.

But today, a portrait of a young prince. We see Prince Harry, Prince William wearing their military medals, getting onto helicopters, and showing that they have been military trained. Well, this is the same thing in these wonderful portraits by Velázquez.