

A Mysterious Domestic Universe

By Lance Esplund

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One of the most direct ways to enter Diego Rodriguez de Silva y Velazquez's "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" (1618) is from the lower-right corner, where the artist guides us through a semiglazed earthenware jug's curved white handle, which dives into the painting like a fish into a boat. Similarly, we are thrown into Velazquez's dark and mysterious, dramatically lighted scene, in which a seated woman fries eggs in olive oil; and a boy stands, eager yet pensive, holding a melon and a flask of wine.

Immediately, as if on a dance floor, Velazquez leads. The jug-handle's leap sets the pitcher in motion, spinning us in one direction and then another. The artist winds us up and sets us whirling across a crowded wooden table, through a still life made up of common foodstuffs and kitchen utensils.

The first object we encounter is another part-glazed jug -- a glossier, bluish-black form. Pursing its reddish lips, the darker jug turns its back, as if shaking its ponytail-handle in the white pitcher's face. Rebuffed but undeterred, the white jug's blue flourish -- like a winking eye -- darts toward its neighbor.

Velazquez's playful prelude sets the stage for swiftly moving curves and lighthearted flirtatiousness. It also introduces the theme of opposites: light and dark; male and female; inside and outside; young and old.

Scanning the painting's lower register, and snaking through a series of glowing circles, ovals and spheres, as if traversing a frieze, we compare the duller, yellowish surface of the brass mortar-and-pestle to the more brilliant reddish gleam of the deep frying pan. We notice subtle variations between the matte finishes of white eggshell and white glazed bowl; the softness of cloth is contrasted with hard ceramic; we weigh an onion's violet flesh against dried red chili peppers' crinkly skin. Traveling upward, we compare shiny golden yolk to a melon's coarsened yellow shell; rough twine to silky onion root; congealing egg white to wicker, glass, wood, tin, hot oil and steel; the glow of youth to the burnish of age.

Roughly 3 feet high by 4 feet wide, "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" is on view through Feb. 1, 2015, at New York's Frick Collection as one of the 10 pictures from Edinburgh in "Masterpieces From the Scottish National Gallery." It is an emboldened work by the burgeoning Spanish master. Painted when Velazquez (1599-1660) was just 18 or 19 years old, it is among the pictures he completed during his first year as an independent master in Seville, after having served for six years as an apprentice to Francisco Pacheco (1564-1644), a painter and theorist most famous for being Velazquez's teacher. That same year, in 1618, Velazquez married Pacheco's daughter. In 1623, he moved permanently to Madrid, where he was appointed court painter to Philip IV and, subsequently, painted primarily royal portraits, including the Prado's staggering, perplexing tour-de-force "Las Meninas" (1656). Velazquez's 1644 portrait of Philip -- with sleeves like molten silver -- is a shining star of the Frick's permanent collection.

"An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" represents one of his paintings from the Spanish Golden Age genre bodegon, which Velazquez is credited with reinventing. Bodegon refers to kitchen or tavern scenes that include still lifes and figures – usually of common stock.

Aidan Weston-Lewis, chief curator of the Scottish National Gallery, notes in the show's catalog that Velazquez's painting betrays "an element of youthful inexperience" – "minor weaknesses" that include "no discernible narrative" and little interaction between the figures. He suggests that the painting's "somewhat episodic, staccato effect" is because Velazquez probably worked piecemeal, painting still life, woman and boy all "directly from life, alla prima, but separately rather than as an integrated whole."

This very well may have been young Velazquez's studio process. But I'm willing to take this painting at face value. "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" is not near the level of metaphoric complexity evident in "Las Meninas" – nor is any part as audacious as the miraculous sleeves in the Frick's portrait of King Philip. But it is still a Velazquez.

To begin with, "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" is cool, enigmatic – somewhat otherworldly. Its Caravaggesque contrast of luminous details amid murky darkness adds emotional drama. Forms ignite like flashes of self-consciousness or exposure; or as if objects, vying for attention, hoped to be noticed within the enveloping dark. And although there is no eye contact between woman and boy (he looks down and away; she looks straight ahead, as if in a trance or blind), there still seems to be plenty going on between them.

The painting, tightly wound, is delicately balanced, exceedingly tactile and full of anticipation. And there is luscious ambiguity. Like a clockmaker, Velazquez locks everything into place. The organization of the painting – in which illuminated forms appear to revolve, as if in the night sky, around the egg and the charcoal brazier – conveys a sense not of a natural interior but of the solar system. The tabletop, oddly tilted, is about to topple its contents outward. And the boy, who is farthest away, also looms very close, with his face as if pressed against the front plane of the painting. Like the white ceramic jug, his head – turning toward and away from the old woman simultaneously – spins in place. And, like the objects in the painting, we also orbit, dip and hover, looking down at the table yet up at the boy.

Navigating Velazquez's bizarre constellation, we encounter an ambitious young painter, at the beginning of his career, deftly juggling forms, symbols, metaphors and allegorical ideas. As with "Las Meninas" – one of the most compelling and puzzling paintings in the Western canon – "An Old Woman Cooking Eggs" is riveting, in part, because its forms are so solid and clear yet its meaning evades us. What this early masterpiece teaches us is that Velazquez, always in control, courted ambiguity – mystery – from the start.