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Article abstract

Dans sa conception classique, le cadre donne de la légitimité, de l'autorité et de la crédibilité à la vision du monde qui y est représentée ; il donne du pouvoir à la représentation. Cette situation change au début de la modernité. Plutôt que de légitimer l'image, le cadre déclare alors l'indépendance de l'image vis-à-vis du regardeur. La relation entre image et spectateur, pour qui le cadre joue son rôle de représentation, passe de la crédibilité au détachement. Le portrait de royauté, exemplaire de l'image qui fait autorité, illustre bien ce changement, notamment dans les tableaux de Vélázquez et Goya.

# Law or Independence – What Does the Frame Stand For?

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Résumé

Dans sa conception classique, le cadre donne de la légitimité, de l'autorité et de la crédibilité à la vision du monde qui y est représentée ; il donne du pouvoir à la représentation. Cette situation change au début de la modernité. Plutôt que de légitimer l'image, le cadre déclare alors l'indépendance de l'image vis-à-vis du regardeur. La relation entre image et spectateur, pour qui le cadre joue son rôle de représentation, passe de la crédibilité au détachement. Le portrait de royauté, exemplaire de l'image qui fait autorité, illustre bien ce changement, notamment dans les tableaux de Vélázquez et Goya.

What do frames stand for? I want to propose that frames designate the relation between the inside and the outside of paintings. More precisely, a frame – as Louis Marin said – "can be understood as an interval of the limits of the three spaces which a painting unites"[1]: the space represented in the image, the surface of the painting, and the space of the viewer in front of the painting. Considering a frame as the meeting point of these three spaces enables me to regard a frame as a manifestation of the relation between represented space and the surface of the painting, on the one hand, and between the painting and the space of the viewer in front of the painting on the other. This focus on frames as locations of relations allows an analysis of the fictional, ideal frames that the painting proposes, and to which the actual frames possibly, but not necessarily, correspond.

Marin further attributes the following function to the frame:

> The frame is sign and operator of the shift from the descriptive mode of an empirical type of representation – presenting itself representing something – to the injunctive or prescriptive mode of a juridical type of representation – which has the right and the authority to present itself representing, presenting itself legitimately representing.[2]

In short, frames indicate a passage from "empirical" representation to "legitimate" representation. Frames, in this conception, characterize the relation between the painting's surface and the represented content as legitimate. Elsewhere Marin stated that frames establish continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator.[3] Hence, frames in Louis Marin's so-called classical conception designate legitimacy and continuity. This model, as I want to develop in this article, describes precisely the way the frame works in a "representation of classical representation"[4]: *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (fig. 1).

Yet it seems to me that this classic model no longer applies when one considers a work by Velázquez's most renowned successor: Francisco Goya's *Family of Charles IV* (fig. 2). Here the relation between the surface of the painting and the space represented is explicitly left open and undetermined. And rather than establishing continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator, the frame demonstrates a gap that marks the image's independence from the viewer. This article will elaborate on my claim that what the frame stands for in these two canonical paintings shifts from legitimacy and continuity to independence and delimitation.

## The Family of Philip IV

I begin with *The Family of Philip IV*, today called *Las Meninas*. The German art historian Carl Justi noted in 1888 "an abundance of frames in this image: many, all black frames of oil paintings, frames of the mirror, the door, the easel."[5] There is a wide range (almost an inventory) of different types of frames, of which I will discuss two, the mirror and the door frame, to show how they reveal the function of the picture frame itself.

In examining the relation between the painting's surface and the represented space in *Las Meninas* the question is whether the frame declares that the painting is a legitimate representation of the represented figures – as the classical frame supposedly does. Because it is a portrait of the royal family, this question of the legitimacy of a representation takes on a specific concern: the infanta has to be presented as the legitimate representative of the king.[6] As she is placed in the foreground of the painting, while the king is shown in the mirror in the background of the represented space, the relation between the painting's surface and the represented space is inseparably associated with dynastic succession.

There are two ways in which the framing in this image establishes equivalence between these two levels. First, the frame marks the limits of the painting's surface; this defines the painting's centre, which is located where the infanta stands. The frames of the paintings on the back wall of the room also present a symmetrical order, with the mirror hanging at the centre (fig. 3). The frames of the paintings and mirror mark the fact that the infanta occupies the centre of the actual painting, as her parents occupy the centre of the represented space. In this way equivalence is indicated between the structure of the painting's surface and the represented image, the mirror. Moreover, an examination of the structure of the painting shows that, again and again, one side of the image presents the mirror image of the other. The door mirrors the mirror, Velázquez mirrors his

Figure 1. Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas*, 1656. Oil on canvas, 318 × 276 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Museo del Prado).

alter ego, Nieto Velázquez – the seneschal of the Queen – in the door, and so on. This mirror-image or symmetrical surface structure corresponds to the function of the represented object, the mirror. Thereby the painting not only represents a mirror, but in its formal structure it presents the function of a mirror. This equivalence between the structure of the painting and the represented object underlines the capacity of the painting to represent a mirror.

On another level, the physical qualities of the frame underscore the correspondence that exists between the mirror and the painting. The mirror is bounded by a black wooden frame with a white stripe along its inner edges. In addition, one can see a red curtain on the foreground of the reflected image. The image of the mirror, therefore, is surrounded by a red-white-black framework. Correspondingly, on the right border of the painting one can recognize a red-white-black framing: the lower third is marked by the little figure dressed in red, the middle third features a bright reflection of light, and the upper third is indicated by a dark wooden frame. Thus, the borders of the painting and the mirror's surface not only have the same mirror-symmetrical structure but also the same colours. The painted canvas at its limits appears comparable to the surface of a mirror: there is a dark frame, red material, and, in the middle, the blank surface that reflects light.

To summarize my argument thus far: the framing in *Las Meninas* establishes a structural as well as a material continuity between the represented image of the parents and the represented painting of the infanta. This demonstration that the painting's surface structurally and materially corresponds to what it represents can be understood as a legitimization of the representation. The painting legitimately represents the mirror and its reflection of the parents and the infanta legitimately represents her parents.

If one regards the painting within this framework, the decisive question shifts from whether the model that a painting presents corresponds to an external reality, to the question of whether the model of reality that the painting presents appears to be legitimized. The framing of *Las Meninas* enables the painting to present a model of the reality as legitimate, which does not necessarily correspond to the then-common model of reality.

Having considered the relation between the represented space and the surface of the painting, I will now analyse the relation between the painting and its spectator. On the other side of the mirror-axis of the painting, there is a door opening. In this "double" of the mirror, a standing figure just beyond the threshold of the door is visible. It is also possible to trace the vanishing point to this opening, which is thus the central point of the space, as seen from the perspective of the fictive spectator of the image. Hence, the position behind the door frame can be regarded as a prefiguration of the spectator's place in front of the image. The door frame then seems to describe how the image conceives its relation to the space of the spectator beyond its frame. It can be imagined that the viewer in the door crosses the threshold. The light actually does so: it falls from the outside through the frame. This "mirrors" the light that seems to fall onto the very foreground of the image from an opening that is supposedly located just beyond the right-hand edge of the painting. The light seems to cross the limits of the framed space.

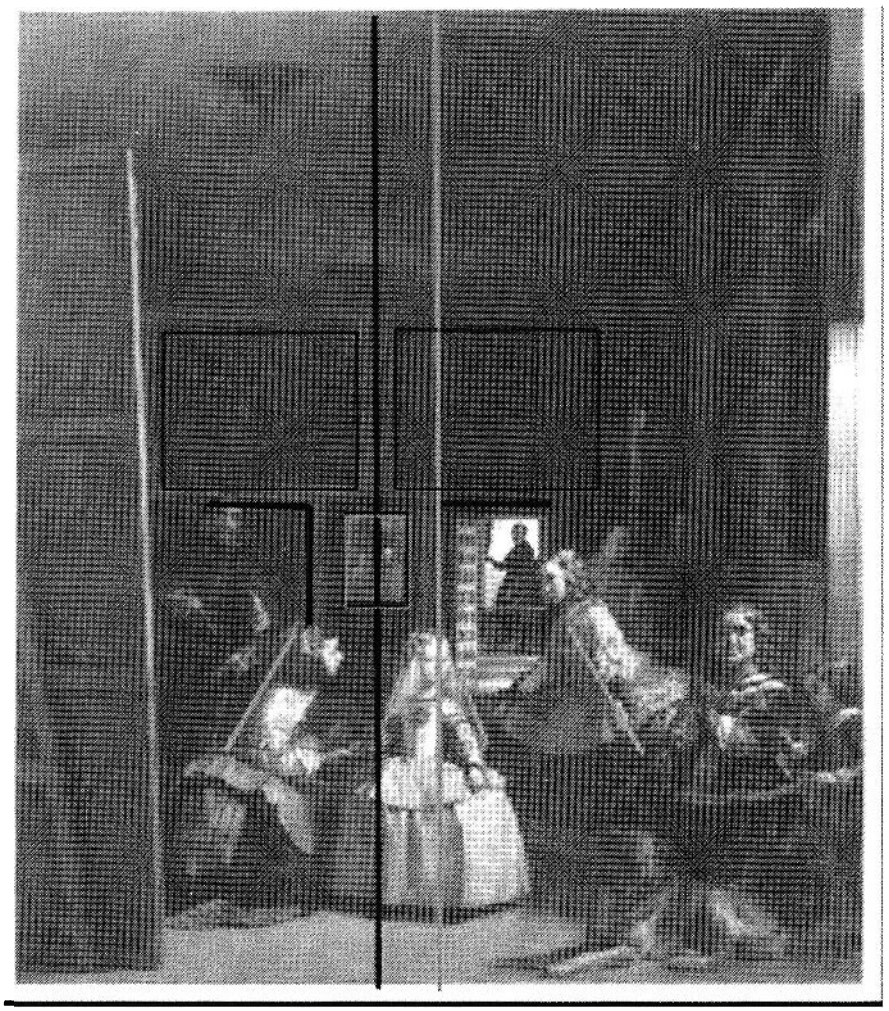
Figure 2. Francisco Goya, *The Family of Charles IV*, 1800–01. Oil on canvas, 280 x 336 cm. Madrid, Museo del Prado (Photo: Museo del Prado).

Furthermore, the open door itself designates a spatial continuation behind the door frame. This door has a "double" – sharing its light brown colour and its position – in the canvas that is located in the very foreground of the image. And, like the door frame, the depicted canvas also seems to continue beyond the frame of the painting itself. All of these phenomena announce a spatial continuity between the spaces behind and in front of the depicted space. By the model of the door frame and its correspondence with the frame of the painting itself, the painting suggests a continuity between the represented space and the space of the spectator. The framing of *Las Meninas* thus promises both legitimacy and continuity.[7]

## The Family of Charles IV

I now want to consider the portrait of the royal family that Goya painted as the first court painter, the same position held by Velázquez 150 years earlier. It has often been remarked that the *Family of Charles IV* refers to Velázquez's *Family of Philip IV*. For example, Goya's own position in the painting corresponds to the one occupied by Velázquez in *Las Meninas*, and the queen's posture corresponds to that of the infanta. Goya also places the family portrait in front of a wall decorated with two paintings. But in Goya's work the axis between these two paintings is empty: no mirror or, indeed, any central image is framed there. A central element of Velázquez's construction of equivalence is missing. In addition, Goya performs a kind of "zoom," such that no ceiling or side walls of the room are seen; one can see only the room's back wall, parallel to the painting's surface. There is thus minimal indication of the extension of space between the foreground and the background of the painting.[8] In this way Goya appears to do without the construction of spatial continuity in the relation between the surface of the painting and the represented space, as well as between the actual

Figure 3. Diagram of the symmetrical structure of *Las Meninas* (by the author).



painting and represented paintings. A framework, which promises a correspondence between the surface of the painting and the depicted objects, is missing. The legitimization of the representation, decisive for the comprehension of *Las Meninas* as a legitimate model of reality, is lacking. It is my contention that this lack of a legitimizing support in Goya's painting allows the spectator to question whether the painting has the legitimacy to represent the king.

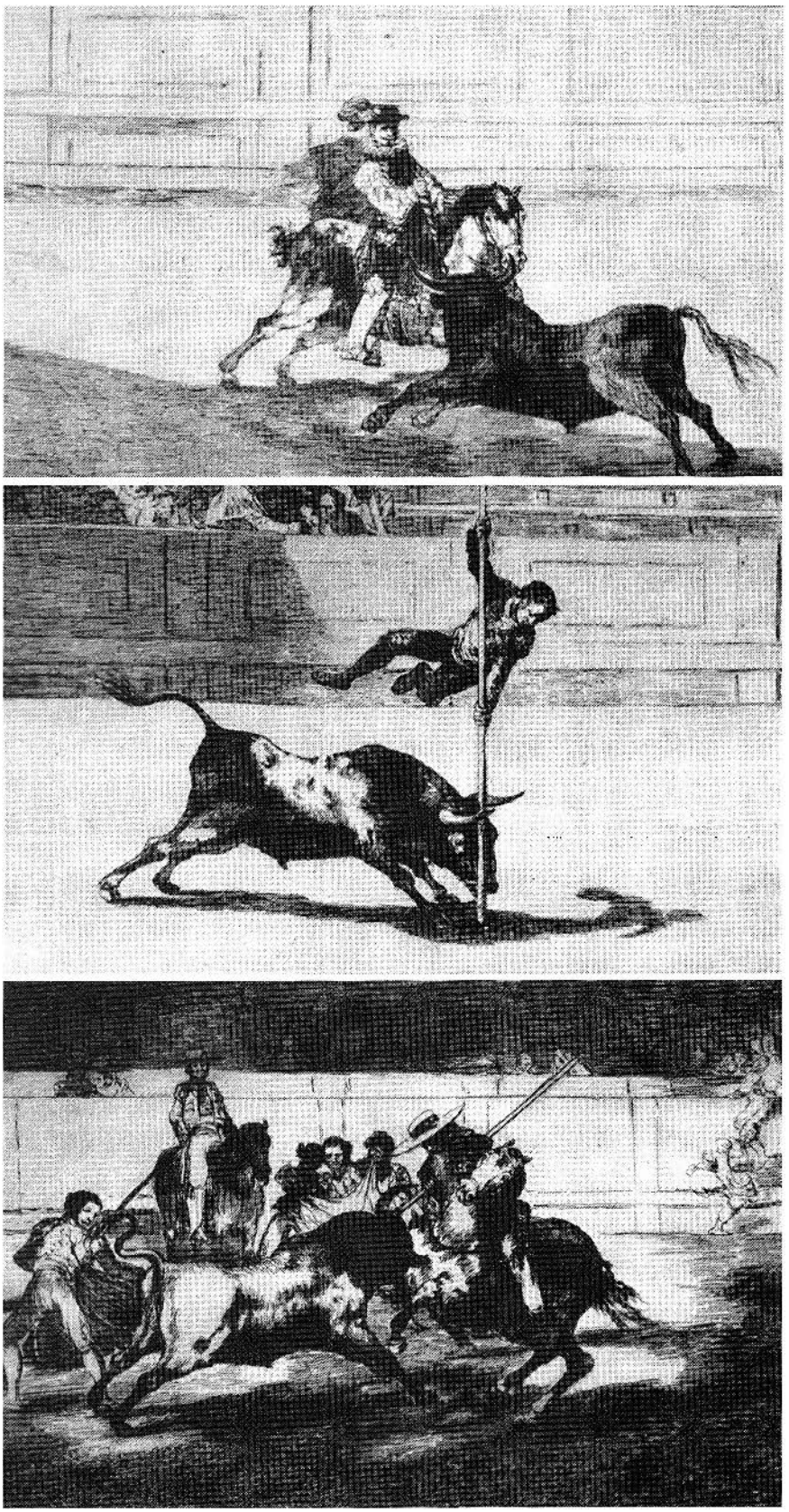
This, obviously, has consequences for the relation of *The Family of Charles IV* to the spectator's space. The painting does not suggest continuity with what it represents "behind" its surface, neither is there a spatial construction that touches the limits of the painting; thus there is no indication that it could be extended into the space in front of the painting. On the contrary, the figures in this painting seem careful not to touch the lower limit of the image, which would bring them into contact with the spectator's space. So while the frame functions as a threshold between two spaces in *Las Meninas*, in Goya's *Family of Charles IV* a delimitation appears in its place. Accordingly, Goya excludes any depiction of space for the spectator on the other side of the frame: a task performed by the door opening that Velázquez included in *Las Meninas*. The frame in Goya's painting does not establish a clearly defined relation between the represented space and the "real" space of the spectator as we saw in *Las Meninas*. Instead it marks a delimitation and a "non-defined-zone."[9] In so doing the image appears to give up its authority over the spectator's space; no allowance is made for a position from which the spectator is to view the painting. This creates a "non-obligation" between image and viewer. Goya's portrait is thus characterized by a lack of legitimization and a delimitation from the space of the spectator.

But I wish not only to point out what is missing in Goya's work compared to the "classical representation" in *Las Meninas*. I also want to show how Goya fills the gap he opens. This takes on a special relevance, in view of my argument that the framings in *Las Meninas* generate not only a continuity between the actual painting and the represented space, but also between the infanta and her ancestors. One may wonder, therefore, how Goya deals with the task of demonstrating dynastic continuity.

Compared to *Las Meninas,* the royal couple in Goya's painting move from the background to the same level as its successors in the foreground of the painting. Hence, dynastic continuity is performed between different parts of the painting's surface. And Goya uses superficial material qualities to establish coherence between the members of the family: the clothes seem to form a pattern within which the bodies are enveloped. I wish to consider how this pattern works by examining only one, perhaps emblematic, element: the sashes.

The sashes are repeated around the bodies of all the members of the royal family. They form a continuous pattern, tying the figures together.[10] They first run in diagonal parallels, then turn into horizontals in the middle of the painting, and then continue in diagonal parallels again.[11] Hereby a connection between the different members of the royal family is established with no reference to the painting as a whole. One may describe this as an ornamental structure, as opposed to the compositional

Figure 4. Goya, *La Tauromaquia*, Sheets 13, 20, 28, published 1816. Engraving and aquatint, 245–50 × 350–55 mm (Photo: reproduced from *Francisco de Goya. Radierungen. Die Sammlung des Morat-Institutes*, eds Karl Ludwig Hofmann, Christmut Präger and Veronika Schroeder, Heidelberg, 1996).



relation between the parts and the whole in *Las Meninas*. Dynastic continuity in Goya's work is indicated by the pattern of coloured fabrics: ornaments of state. It therefore looks as if Goya not only decomposes the legitimizing framework of Velázquez's royal portrait, but also proposes a new model of royalty based on superficial ornaments.

But more is thus established than just continuity between the family members; one may also imagine that the pattern of the sashes extends beyond the sides of the image. The spatial continuity of *Las Meninas* – to the back and to the front – included the spectator's space. In Goya's painting this has been transformed into a superficial horizontal continuity – to the left and right – which excludes the spectator's space. This suggests that the ornamental surface that signals the continuation of royalty is at the same time a delimitation between the royal group and the space of the spectator. The superficial ornament appears as a mark of the exclusiveness and distinction of royalty, which runs counter to the claim of *Las Meninas* that the presented order reaches out into the space of the spectator.

What is remarkable is that the structure of the sash – a strip of textile horizontally divided into three bands, limited in its width, and extendable in its length – corresponds to the surface of the painting itself, which also is a longish textile divided into three fields, of which the middle one is the brightest. Thus, the sashes as well as the canvas form a stripe that appears limited in the vertical but that is extendable along the horizontal. Besides this structural correspondence, the sashes are positioned very close to the painting's surface. There, the sashes and the surface stand somewhat like a fence in between the represented space and the spectator; the ornament in a way closes the represented space. Goya seems to illustrate this in relation to his own position as a first spectator of the image, where the canvas stands between him and the royal family.

As the surface is conceived as a delimitation, the frame also does not appear as a spatial threshold between the painting's

and the viewer's space any more, but as a flat and material ornamental structure, which separates the painted space from the spectator. Accordingly, frames in Goya's painting appear as golden ornaments, rather than as distinctive forms as was the case in *Las Meninas*.

The sashes, the painted surface, and the frame thus correspond in their functions: they delimit the space and indicate continuity on a superficial level. Goya fills the gap between the represented and the "real" space with an ornamental foil that stands between royalty and the spectator. Curiously, the Spanish word for sash, *banda*, also means "group," and the delimitation of a field against a spectator. If one wishes to name it, therefore, the framing conception that Goya installed in place of the classical framing might be termed *banda*. Goya exposed this framing structure more explicitly in his *Tauromachia* (fig. 4): the *banda* of the arena, parallel to the wooden frame engraved around the images, at the same time delimits the bullring against the space of the spectator, and indicates a continuation of the row of framings toward the sides.

It can thus be stated, that the frame is by no means a constant parameter of Western easel painting, as is often assumed; rather it can shift its function, from an indicator of compositional structure to that of a superficial ornament, from a threshold between represented space and spectator to a delimitation between them. And where in *Las Meninas* the frame appears to perform the legitimization of the royal portrait, in Goya's portrait of the royal family the frame in its ornamental quality seems to declare that the continuity of the royal family is independent of the space outside the painting.

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## Notes

1 «Le cadre peut alors être compris comme un intervalle des bords des trois espaces que conjoint le tableau (représenté, de représentation et de présentation).» Louis Marin, «Du cadre au décor ou la question de l'ornement dans la peinture,» *Rivista di Estetica* 12 (1993), 23. My translation unless stated otherwise.

2 "Le cadre est le signe et l'opérateur du passage de la modalité constative de type empirique de la représentation – elle se présente représentant quelque chose – à sa modalité injonctive ou prescriptive de type juridique – elle a droit et autorité de se présenter représentant, elle se présente légitimement représentant..." Marin, "Du cadre au décor," 21.

3 Marin, "Du cadre au décor," 31.

4 Michel Foucault, *Les mots et les choses* (Paris, 1996 [1966]), 31.

5 "Ein Überfluß von Rahmen in dem Bilde: viele, sämtlich schwarze Rahmen von Ölgemälden. Rahmen des Spiegels, der Tür, der Staffelei." Carl Justi, "Die Familie Philipps IV. (*Las Meninas*)" [1888], *Las Meninas im Spiegel der Deutungen. Eine Einführung in die Methoden der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Thierry Greub (Berlin, 2001), 91. He continues: "Und doch ist kein Bild geeigneter, das Bild vergessen zu machen. 'Où est donc le tableau?' fragte Théophile Gautier." The "doch" in this context indicates the modern understanding that for illusion one has to neglect the picture surface, which thus has a problem with the frame, as it then would contradict illusion.

6 Jeannine Baticle and Manuela B. Mena Marqués concluded that this image was made as an image of instauration. Jeannine Baticle, *Velázquez, el pintor hidalgo* (Madrid, 1990), 116–17; and Manuela B. Mena Marqués, "Die Spitze am Ärmel der Zwergin Mari-Bárbola im Gemälde *Las Meninas* von Velázquez," *Las Meninas im Spiegel der Deutungen. Eine Einführung in die Methoden der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Thierry Greub (Berlin, 2001), 247–80. John H. Elliott contested this, according to him Margarita had never been considered as heir to the throne. Jonathan Brown, John H. Elliott, and Carmen Garrido, "'Las Meninas' como obra maesta," *Velázquez*, ed. Fondación Amigos del Museo del Prado (Barcelona, 1999), 97–102.

7 Evidently Velázquez's construction differs from its model, Jan van Eyck's *The Arnolfini Marriage*. Jan van Eyck establishes equivalence between painting and mirror not by structural equivalence but by figurative repetition, and he indicates continuity between depicted space and the spectator's space by placing the spectator in the mirror. I cannot develop the implications of these models here, but I want to point out that in the case of Velázquez the indications of equivalence and continuity are to be found in the structure of the surface rather than on a mimetic level as in Van Eyck's case. Thus, the surface as the frame plays a constitutive – not a deconstructive – role in the constitution of the authority of Velázquez's painting.

8 This " zoom" also implies that one does not see the limits of the wall any more on which the paintings in the background are placed. Without this frame of reference, the paintings on the back wall look like they could shift to the right or to the left without fundamentally disturbing the composition. Frames, rather than marking a definite position as they do in *Las Meninas,* seem to demonstrate mobility. The impression of a mobile framing is underlined by the way Goya depicts frames without sharp contours and as repetitive lines resembling traces of altering positions, rather than as fixed forms. This is most obvious in Goya's etching after *Las Meninas*.

9 This comes close to what Wolfgang Iser described as "blanc." Wolfgang Iser, *Der Akt des Lesens. Theorie ästhetischer Wirkung* (Munich, 1976), 257–355.

10 Jörg Träger describes this as follows: "The group seems to be webbed by a cocoon of common heritable preciousness ... By this pupation unity is constructed. This is underlined by the blue-white-blue striped sashes, which pattern the family as an ornamental rapport." Jörg Träger, "Goyas königliche Familie: Hofkunst und Bürgerblick," *Münchner Jahrbuch der bildenden Kunst* 41 (1990), 169. "Die Figurengruppe scheint übersponnen durch einen Kokon

gemeinsamer erblicher Kostbarkeit. Er nimmt in den Perücken der Herren eine attrappenhafte Qualität an. Durch diese Verpuppung wird Einheit gestiftet. Sie wird von den blau-weiß-blau gestreiften Ordensschärpen unterstrichen, welche die Familie wie mit einem ornamentalen Rapport durchmustern."

11 From left to right: On the red suit of the boy at the far left, one sees a diagonal blue-white sash, then another parallel to this on the blue clothing of Ferdinand, the heir to the throne. A small segment of sash can even be seen on the shoulder of the older woman in the second row. On the woman beside Ferdinand, the sash fades slightly and turns from a diagonal position over the shoulder into a horizontal belt around the waist. This s-shape repeats exactly on the dress of the king's daughter, who is in the arm of the queen. On the queen, the sash runs horizontally, though one end hangs down and indicates, underlined by the diagonal of the queen's arm, the continuation of this line in the diagonal sash of the little prince. The prince's sash runs parallel to the one that crosses the chest of the king and a diagonal sash repeats on the man adjacent to the king. The line of that sash connects to the one on the baby, which unites with the mother's sash. Family ties.