

"A SYBIL"

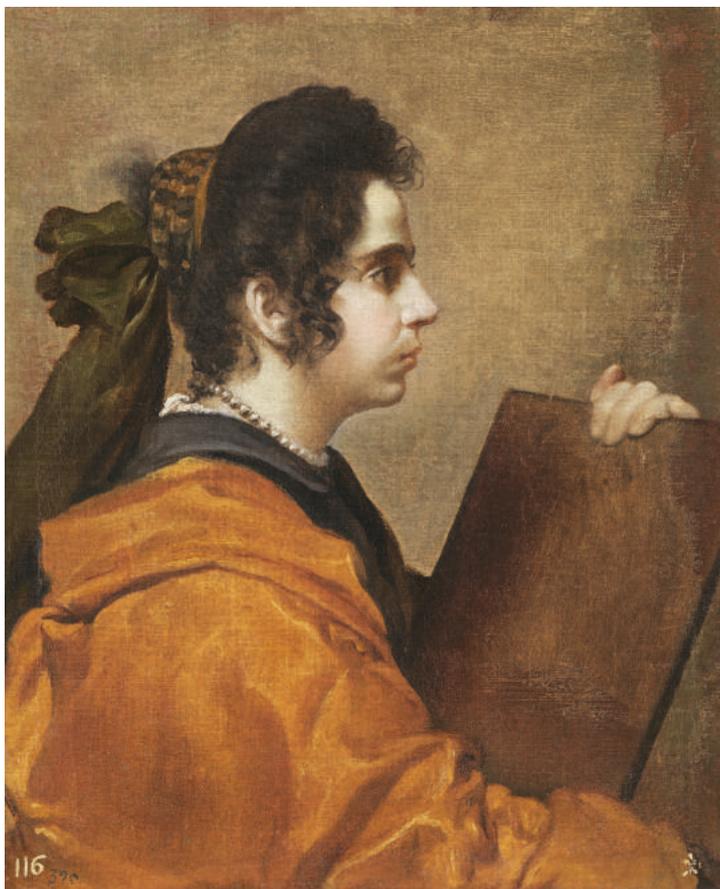
DIEGO RODRÍGUEZ DE SILVA Y VELÁZQUEZ

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THE FIRST KNOWN REFERENCE to this work dates from 1746, when an inventory of paintings at the La Granja Palace was drawn up. There, it is attributed to Velázquez and identified as a likeness of his wife, Juana, whose father was the painter Francisco Pacheco, and who was 30 years old in 1632. The linking of anonymous portraits to the lives of their authors was frequent in the 18th and 19th centuries, and Velázquez was no exception, as several of his works were thought to include his face, as well as likenesses of his wife and children.

While information about this work's original context is lacking, the elements appearing in it suggest it may depict one of the sibyls, whom Greco-Roman mythology assigned divinatory powers. Adopted by Christian thought, they were considered to have foretold the coming of Christ. In that sense, the object she holds would have been used to represent her premonitions. While she has sometimes been identified as an allegorical representation of history or painting, such works tend to be more explicit, whereas the elements visible here are sufficient to associate her with a sibyl. The latter are generally represented with a writing surface, but sometimes they hold a pictorial one. Such is the case with one of the sibyls in Claudio Coello's *Annunciation* (Madrid, Convent of San Plácido), who appears without a turban and holds a canvas or panel bearing a painting of an allegory of the Virgin.

The *Sybil* from the Prado Museum, which occupies a unique position in the work of Velázquez, has come to be viewed as the epitome of the artist's descriptive and narrative technique. The painter, who was born in 1599, completed the first phase of his career in Seville, his city of birth, where he produced primarily religious and genre paintings. In 1623, he moved to Madrid, following which his progression was closely linked to Philip IV, for whom he worked as court painter. This relationship had repercussions both for Velázquez's style and for the themes he painted, prompting him to focus largely on portraits and, at times, mythological themes; meanwhile, he set aside genre scenes, producing only reli-



Diego Velázquez (1599-1660)

A Sybil

ca. 1632

Oil on canvas

62 × 50 cm

Provenance: Colección Real

Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P01197

gious paintings. During the last 25 years of his life, however, he almost completely abandoned these themes, and this *Sybil* is one of the few Velázquez paintings with a religious theme to have been produced after 1630.

In it, the artist plays with narrative ambiguity and paradox, as is customary in his work. The woman in the portrait has frequently been identified as the painter's wife, Juana Pacheco, due less to coincidence and more to her powerfully realistic facial features, which appear to be inspi-

Diego Velázquez
Joseph's tunic
 (detail)
 ca. 1630
 Oil on canvas
 Real Sitio
 de San Lorenzo
 de El Escorial,
 inv. 1001469



Diego Velázquez
Vulcan's Forge
 (detail)
 1630
 Oil on canvas
 Madrid, Museo
 Nacional del Prado,
 inv. P01171

red by a flesh and blood model. Velázquez used a very common feature in his work here, linked to his taste for paradox: the mixture of varying degrees of storytelling and reality. Around 1630, he would employ the same method in *The Triumph of Bacchus* (or *Los Borrachos*), mixing gods with real life characters. He also did so in *Vulcan's Forge* and in *Joseph's Tunic*, in which he uses markedly 'lifelike' human forms.

Joseph's Tunic in particular, painted in Rome in 1630, is the most useful work to place *A Sybil* in a precise chronological and artistic context, as they share many common characteristics. Among these shared features are the perfect balance between composition and colour: while *A Sybil* is a carefully composed painting, created using a very precise descriptive technique, the way in which the colour is applied plays a highly significant role in the final product, in which the brush strokes take on structural value. We can see this, for example, in the sleeve occupying the lower part of the canvas, whose folds are painted with quick, accurate strokes, reminding us that Velázquez was a leader in the Western tradition of colour use. Equally, the locks of hair are a *tour de force* in terms of the brush strokes and control exercised, bringing the work closer to the Apollo in *Vulcan's Forge* or to some of Joseph's brothers.

Besides his control over the drawing and colouring, Velázquez was renowned for his assurance in composition. The figure of the woman solidly fills the foreground of this painting. This focus,

her profile position and her forward-looking gaze convey stability and solemnity. However, this formula risks negating or complicating the spatial planes, with Velázquez avoiding this by positioning her board obliquely, endeavouring to ensure that the form of the face gives the sensation of volume, and using a chromatic range based on ochres, ivories and greys, which combine perfectly and create a feeling of space. This all culminates in a background which, as would become customary in the painter's work from that period, is not uniform; instead, it displays subtle variations in light and colour which serve to enhance the three-dimensional effect of the figure.

Velázquez was a versatile artist who was able to move between varied pictorial genres and very different formats with ease. In this case, he was able to create a small masterpiece, in which he brings together many of the technical successes he had achieved by 1630 and demonstrates his unique narrative technique. Firstly, by presenting us with a handling of the theme which was different from anything that had been produced by other artists previously. But also, as was his custom, by transforming the portrait into an enigma, whose solution could only be supplied by the Sybil herself.

Javier Portús Pérez

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