Picking Up the Brush for Emperors and Sultans. Imperial Portraits as Representations of Power in The Early Modern Mediterranean (Ca. 1450-Ca. 1650)

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss the influence of interdependently effective political discourses and cultural differences in early modern Mediterranean regarding the motives for official state portraiture. Therefore, the paper will focus on the portraits of monarchs, foremost the depictions of Philip IV of Spain by the court painter Velázquez and works of Titian under the patronage of Charles V and Philip II in order to analyse, how the conservative portraiture culture was established and maintained during the so-called *Siglo de Oro*.In contrast to the western Mediterranean, the intercultural portraiture style of the Ottoman Emperor Mehmed II will be given to emphasize the significant role of political inclinations of monarchs on their portraits. A multi-layered approach lies therefore at the basis of full socio-political and cultural comprehension of the paintings to overcome a simple analysis and to contextualize the work of art within both macro and micro historical perspective.

Keywords: Mediterranean, Court Painters, Authority, Ottoman Sultanate, Spain

In the absence of written sources, art and visual evidence such as paintings, can guide scholars in the pursuit of understanding intercultural connections and influences. In the fifteenth and sixteenth century Mediterranean, with the Renaissance and Baroque emphasis on portraiture, a certain type of depictions prompted a real intention to represent the unique appearance of a particular person held as a subject of historical analysis (Sorabella, 2007).Indeed, the depictions of a person, as Erwin Panofsky puts it, "seeks to bring out whatever the sitter has in common with the rest of humanity" and may be regarded as a good answer to the question of why to study the paintings of the monarchs (as quoted in West, 2004, p. 24). However, monarchs cannot be assumed outside their political positions, so partially opposing the abovementioned view, this paper aims at presenting some works of art of three early Modern artists - Velázquez, Titian and Bel-

lini - as focusing on their specific representations of authority and power in Western and Eastern Mediterranean in order to investigate the motives for official state portraiture. In particular, the focus will be on the means of obtaining a portrayal conveying political ambitions, especially in relation to the cultural background in a comparative approach, meanwhile acknowledging the historical trajectories of the two halves of early Modern Mediterranean.

In this light, the paper will concern with the portraits of monarchs, primarily the depictions of Philip IV (1621-1665) of Spain by the court painter Velázquez, as mirroring the Imperial stance in the social and political turmoil gripping the Spanish dominions through Mediterranean during the first half of the 17th century. In fact, calling him just a court painter does not do justice to Velázquez, especially considering his political role in Philip IV's court. Indeed, in 1652 he was appointed the *Aposentador Mayor* (Palace Marshall) and selected as the sole responsible for all the interior arrangements of the palace (Armstrong, 1896/2013, pp. 80-81). This narrative by Armstrong hints at the culture of the Spanish royal court, "harassing minutiae of a rigid and bewildering etiquette", occupied with traditions, which are also evident in Velázquez' portrayals of Philip IV (1896/2013, pp. 80-81).

When the portraits of Philip IV are observed, a recurrent theme stands out. Jonathan Brown (1986) calls it "restraint and sobriety "for most of the depictions are rather simple, and lack the use of allegories, which is predominant especially in court painting from the Renaissance through Baroque period (p. 137). The elimination of the representation of royal symbols and allegories in the Spanish court is often explained by the lack of necessity as the royal power is already 'represented' by the ruler himself. However, Brown (1986) suggests that this approach was only favoured by Philip IV and Velázquez "and by virtually no other European ruler of the time" (p. 138).If Velázquez' portrayal of *Felipe IV*(1623–1628) is analyzed, one symbolic attribution becomes apparent, which is the symbol of the Order of the Golden Fleece, the oldest and longest continuously existing monarchical Order of Knighthood on the European continent, founded in 1430 by Duke Philippe the Good of Burgundy, to promote and defend Christianity, also mutually influential with the *Reconquista* culture (Covert, 2009, p. 10).The portrait that was described in the *Buen Retiro* Palace inventory as

the first time Velázquez depicted Philip IV, is just the beginning of a series of portraits with the same attributions of simplicity (*Corpus Velazqueño*, p. 563).Although Velázquez had travelled to Italy in 1629, the main influence from his trip was in technique, which reached an "austere perfection" but the depiction of Philip IV did not change (Domíguez Ortiz, Pérez Sánchez, Gállego, 1989, p. 36).A suggestion to this lack of influence can be found in the nature of Spanish *Siglo de Oro*, "(…) Spain withdrew into itself, and that its cultural achievements were produced by Spain's own genius and owed little to other nations" (Kamen, 1983, p. 202). Even the added elements tothe1632 portrait of Philip IV such as the drapery might be considered to have a symbolic reference to the monarchy, however, were not to be found again. An exception to this rule of thumb might be the portrayal called *Felipe IV de Castaño y Plata* (Philip IV in Brown and Silver, 1632) with an unprecedented fancy clothing, which has been described by Brown as iconographically ultra conservative for it is as if Velázquez had lifted the figure of the king from an earlier portrait and had given him new clothes(Brown, 1986). One last portrait to be mentioned is the *Felipe IV en Fraga* (Portrait of Philip IV in Fraga,), painted during a campaign to recover Lerida from the French in 1644. The exceptionality of this portrait lays in the fact that Philip IV this is facing to his right, unlike all the previous ones. "Portraits of ruler victorious in war offered an irresistible opportunity for painters in the seventeenth century" notes Brown however, again Velázquez was hesitant to use allegories of victory.

It is evident that Philip IV has a traditional image that he wanted Velázquez to maintain throughout his entire life. There are no personification, glorification or abundant symbolism in his depictions. Two hypotheses have been offered about the attitude of the King towards his portraits. First, and as mentioned before, the embodiment of the royal power within the King might be considered enough to convey the royal power. The symbolism in court paintings can be seen as a legitimization apparatus and as a manifestation of power. By not employing this, Spanish monarchs possibly implied that their right to rule was already asserted powerfully enough and it did not require any regal symbolism. Even when Rubens -who uses allegory exceedingly- visited Madrid, his works clearly point to the fact that "allegory was rejected as an effective means of royal propaganda and the

tradition of simple representations of the monarch continued without interruption" (Brown, 1986, p. 147).

A second point can be made by emphasizing Philip IV's personal desire to be painted accurately. There might be several examples to be given. In 1633 there was a movement of repainting amongst the royal portraits for accuracy; as Brown surmises from *Varia Velazqueña*, - a bibliographic tribute to Velázquez in the 300th anniversary of his death - it can be interpreted that quality and verisimilitude in royal portraits were a matter of concern to the court. In addition, there are several instances when Philip IV requests his face to be altered in portraits or even sculptures. In Pietro Tacca's Equestrian Portrait, a sculpture that arrived in Madrid eight years after it was commissioned, -due to the complaint of the king that he was now older and should be depicted as such- by the sculptures son, to be more accurate (p. 148). In addition, in a letter written by the English ambassador at Madrid which can be found in Clarendon State Papers[1], Sir Arthur Hopton to Sir Francis Secretary of State Velázquez is described as "the king's painter a man of great judgement", which implies the realistic representation of his. Jonathan Brown refers to an unpublished letter of Philip IV where he wishes never to be painted again, due to his old age (Brown, 1986, p. 148). Now that Philip's devotion to being represented as realistic as possible is apparent, it is not surprising that he rejects being altered or his features disguised by painters.

Although August L. Mayer finds "the subtle combination of simplicity and majesty" of the portraits impressing, John Huxtable Elliott rather calls them "a sense of failure, the sudden emptiness of imperial splendour" (Mayer, 1925, p. 62; Elliott, 2002, 386).In the light of Elliot's suggestion, if one is to deeply analyse Philip IV's attitude, it is simply politics and political ambitions, which creates this inclination for verisimilitude. It is not only Philip IV but also his predecessors, Charles V (1516-1556)and Philip II (1554-1598) who followed a similar trend of imperial portraiture. When Philip II's portraits are compared to Philip IV's the similar dressing style and poses are identifiable. This longing for the peculiar portrayal style of

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[1] MS. Bodl. Clar. I8, fol. 232. Extract. Sir Arthur Hopton to Secretary Windebank Madrid July 18/28 i640 Cal. Clarendon State Papers, 1397

his grandfather can be interpreted as a political responsibility for reviving Spain in the 17th century. Indeed, Velázquez's works not only represent the political discourses of Philip IV regarding the last decades of *Siglo de Oro* of Spain, but they also construct a visual representation of the monarch's obsession with verisimilitude and personal constrain from glorification.

In fact, this style as well as an inclination towards simplicity harkens back to the works of Titian under the patronage of Charles V. Indeed, Titian, the Venetian artist who a century earlier inspired Velázquez - opposing the view that Spain's artistic culture was only owed to Spanish artists- portrayed the Emperor simply as a person rather than a source of authority; this clearly contrasted to the traditional artistic manner adorning Imperial portraitures with abundant allegories of power. What is gripping about Titian is his relationship with Charles V; Charles Hope (1979) calls it "something very exceptional" giving examples of letters where authors whom are high ranking court members, and mentioning the time he spends with Charles V or the very intimate terms that they are on (p. 7). The political power of Charles V, as the Holy Roman Emperor with a Habsburg title, compared to the monarchs of his time such as Henry VIII or Francis I is considerable. Portraits of Charles V were a political necessity. Yvonne Hackenbroch (1969) describes his portraits as serving to his position: "they symbolized his dynastic power and omnipresence as head of a vast empire "on which the sun never set," extending from Hungary to Spain, from Flanders to North Africa, and including the new colonies in America." (p. 323).Deriving from this, it can be expected that the royal portraiture of Charles V to be adorned with allegories especially portraying his success and power. Although, many portrait of Charles V are filled with personifications of victory, fame and faith, his own glorification however was not deriving from the symbolism *per se* but his humbleness as conveyed by Titian's *maniera*.

Propaganda is not always glorification. One example of this is the painting called 'the Emperor Charles V at Mühlberg', which celebrates the victory over Schmalkaldic League at Mühlberg in 1547.Indeed, the Schmalkaldic League, the Lutheran alliance within the Holy Roman Empire posed not only a religious but also a political threat to Charles for it was seen by the Spanish court as a revolt against the legitimate ruler. However, Miguel Falomir (2008) suggests that "in fact leading Lutheran nobles such as Maurice

of Saxony supported Charles, whose army was primarily made up of Protestants. In addition, while Titian was painting the portrait in Augsburg, Charles was giving his support to the Interim, which concluded on 12 March 1548, in a last attempt to bring Catholics and Protestants together" (pp. 507-508). In this context, the abovementioned portrayal of Charles V had to be more moderate as to both celebrate the victory but not to show arrogance that would disturb the settlement. His imagery was towards an emperor that was "capable of ruling over a heterogeneous group of states and religions" (Falomir, 2008, pp. 507-508). So, what is missing are references to the actual battle. It is apparent that the portraits of Charles V could not escape the effect of the political discourse and they bore symbolic meaning without employing allegories and symbols.

Evidently, Charles V was eager to construct an image of self, which he wanted to convey to the observer of his portraitures. This image however, was not of an emperor portrayed by personified virtues or filled with ancient Roman symbolism. In his later years," he was fortunate in securing the services of Titian and Leone Leoni, and refused to be portrayed by others; for he appreciated not only their extraordinary talents but even more their concept of him as a ruler" as exemplified with the Mühlberg portrait; this was consistent with the contemporary political discourse (Hackenbroch, 1969, p. 323). However, this was also made possible by his personal relationship with Titian. The portraits are connected to politics in a sense that they construct Charles V's political identity as not only a powerful ruler but also a moderate, humble one.

The portraits of monarchs produced during the so called *Siglo de Oro* often follow the Spanish culture of the time, where "many foreign influences were apparently frowned on in this period" had their own particular style and narratives (Kamen, 1983, p. 202). Even though Titian was Venetian, his portraits of Charles V and Philip II -with a few exceptions as *Philip II Offering Don Fernando to Victory*- conform with the Spanish culture in the specific time period of early 16th and mid-17th centuries. Velázquez, indeed was a successor of Titian in subject and manner, creating a consistency as to approach authority and monarchy in the western Mediterranean, especially the Spanish dominions under the influence of Castile.

In contrast to Velázquez and Titian's artistic approaches to authority, both deliberately lessening the glorification and aiming to create an identity

of ruler where the legitimacy is not derived from the symbolism of the portraiture but exists within the ruler itself, Gentile Bellini -when commissioned by the Mehmed II in third quarter of the 15th century- represented the Ottoman Sultan as bearing the title of "*Victor Orbis*", as quintessential of a dominant ruler. This representation originated from Mehmet II's ambitions of expanding the nascent Ottoman empire to the Western half of the Mediterranean. After the conquest of Constantinople in 1453, the cultural interaction between a new Muslim ruler and the old Byzantine capital – highly representative of the distinct religious backgrounds- chimed with Mehmed II's personal inclinations, which spurred him into requesting a Western artist who for the first time portrayed a Muslim ruler as adopting a western pictorial language as rooted in the Renaissance artistic jargon (Necipoğlu, 2010, p. 264).

What is essential to understand about Mehmed II is that his aim was not only to glorify his own rule, but create multiple dimensions to it, as incorporating both East and the West within one ruler. Gülru Necipoğlu (2010) defines this intercultural as a "creative translation" (p. 262).The transition between Constantinople to *Konstantiniyye* (the Ottoman name of the City) is a direct example of this translation, as Mehmed II constructed the new capital, he imposed his own global vision. In addition, "Mehmed II was the only Muslim ruler of his time to adopt a western pictorial language for self-representation and, by implication, for the representation of Ottoman dynastic identity" (Necipoğlu, 2010, p. 262). Instead of isolating the Ottoman Empire and turned it to its Eastern origins, Mehmed II pursued the aim of redefining it. His interest in western portraiture was two folded.

First, Mehmed II already had an interest in both western painting and literature. About the notebook attributed to him which is preserved in Topkapı Palace, Julian Raby (1982) comments that his drawings "In spirit they evince a European influence which is also evident in the cross hatching and in their format, approaches to drawing and form which is unknown in the Islamic world" (p. 4). In addition, he had a specific interest for European languages as well as history. Also, he had the life of Alexander read to him daily and this contribute to the construction of his own self-image as a Sultan regarding himself as the Emperor of the Romans de facto connecting the 'East to the West', with the exception of marching from the opposite site of the great Macedon (Babinger, 1992, p. 500).However, it is

only logical that his personal interest correlates with his political actions towards the West with the aim of constructing an empire and an identity of emperor for himself; this is also evident from his portraits with a strict usage of western elements and symbolisms.

Second, his patronage of Italian artists, which are not limited to the widely known Bellini, are employed through political relationships and cultural recognition. These were "an extension of his foreign diplomatic relations, a very special kind of gift exchange meant to promote intercultural bonding and political alliance formation" (Necipoğlu, 2010, p. 264). It is not a coincidence that the escalation of this exchange, especially with Mehmed IIs patronage of Italian artists was facilitated by the declaration of peace with Venice (Raby, 1882, p. 5).In addition, the influence of this behaviour was not only towards foreign courts but also "his own Frankish subjects and vassals, polyglot courtiers, and the Italian merchant bankers of Pera and other Ottoman emporia" (Necipoğlu, 2010, p. 267).

The zenith of this cultural exchange can be seen when Bellini's portrait of Mehmed II, was completed in 1480. With its three-quarter view and crowns -crowns assumed to be symbolising the three kingdoms of Mehmed IIs empire; Greece, Asia and Trebizond- it bears the Renaissance and Western portraiture traditions (Raby, 1987, pp. 171-194). It is an unprecedented style not only in Ottoman art but Islamic tradition in general as previous Sultan were never showed *in effigie*. However, it is apparent that his personal ambitions about the West merged with the political aims which lead to the patronage of Western art was more personal to Mehmed II than to his court. Even his son Beyazid II more Eastern oriented especially about political campaigns condemned Mehmed IIs interests, "As Tomaso di Tolfo wrote to Michelangelo from Turkey in 1519, Beyazid took no delight in figures of any sort; indeed, he hated them" (Raby, 1982, p. 8). So, this attempt to create a self-image for Ottoman rulers as a world emperor was volatile.

To conclude, it is clear that motives for royal portraiture can be multifaceted. The abovementioned monarchs had different self-identifications, in the western Mediterranean Philip IV longed for the glory and strength of his predecessors, Charles V struggled with maintaining his own authority during the times of turmoil and resistance; meanwhile the Spanish Habsburgs during *Siglo de Oro* were increasingly unwelcoming of foreign influences. On eastern Mediterranean, instead, Mehmed II desired to represent a

hybrid of cultures to be able to pursue his western expansion. However, what is common with all of them is that even if the portraits are representations of their "self", this self is often underlined by a political purpose. The personal qualities of the portraiture styles are defined through the person's identity as a monarch, and a monarch inevitably is bound by political discourses.

Although further research is needed, as other portrayals can be investigated to test my results, it seems to me possible to surmise that the portraits of authoritiesconvey diverse cues about the nature of the cultural background, the ruler's perception of self, often defined by the very politics of his position. A multi-layered and complex approach lies therefore at the basis of full socio-political and cultural comprehension of the paintings in order to overcome a simple (often purely aesthetic) analysis and to contextualize the work of art within both the macro (Mediterranean) and micro (state or regional) historical perspective. This is true particularly for the early modern period where nation states were in formation and Mediterranean empires were still major actors in Mediterranean world.

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