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The Fall into Oblivion of the Works of the Slave Painter Juan de Pareja

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In this essay I will focus on the mechanisms of forgetting and oversight of the works of the Spanish artist Juan de Pareja (Antequera, c. 1606 – Madrid, 1670), and the consequent lack of critical recognition he has suffered up to the last ten years.

Juan de Pareja was a mulatto painter and slave who succeeded in forging an independent artistic career in seventeenth-century Spain, at a time when, in theory, only those who were free could practice the art of painting. Pareja was the slave and collaborator of the celebrated painter Diego Velázquez (1599-1660) at the court of Philip IV in Madrid, where he was an exceptional case, as was also the relationship between master and slave. Pareja, who was able to read and write, acted as legal witness for Velázquez in documents dating from 1634 to 1653, both in Spain and in Italy, where he went with his master from 1649 to 1651. During Velázquez's second stay in Italy, he immortalized his slave in an extraordinary portrait which he exhibited in the Pantheon in Rome on 19 March 1650, six months before he signed the document of manumission of Pareja. This historic act marked the beginning of Pareja's independent career as a painter, though as the document of liberation of 23 November indicates, his new condition as a freedman did not prevent him from continuing in service to Velázquez, and to his master's descendents, until the end of his life in 1670.

In the slave society of imperial Spain, artists, like the majority of the urban population, would own one or two slaves. The most notable seventeenth-century examples were those of the painters and art theorists Vicente Carducho and Francisco Pacheco, and that of the painter Bartolomé Murillo, whose slave, the Granada-born mulatto Sebastián Gómez, was also a painter. New documents show that the presence of slaves in artists' workshops in Spain was more common than was previously thought. This social practice placed Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco, the first biographer of Pareja, in a dilemma. In El museo pictórico y escala óptica of 1715-24, the painter and art theorist centred his life of Pareja around the latter’s paradoxical condition as both slave and painter. Palomino resorted to the ethnic definition of Pareja in classifying him as 'of mestizo breed and strange colour', and also felt the need to differentiate the occupation of Pareja from that of others of Velázquez’s collaborators by listing his manual tasks, typical of those of a slave: 'grinding colours, and preparing a canvas, and other things in the service of the art, and of the house'. It is clear that Palomino had to defend the classical concept of painting as a liberal activity, practised only by free persons. This dilemma led him to declare that 'Velázquez (for love of his art) never permitted him [Pareja] to occupy himself with anything to do with painting or drawing'.

Consequently, in order to justify the apprenticeship and collaboration of a slave in the workshop of Velázquez at the Spanish court, Palomino turned to one of the constants of the biographies of artists, that of the painter who secretly learns from his master:

He [Pareja] contrived things so cleverly that, by going behind his master's back and depriving himself of sleep, he became able to produce works of Painting that were very worthy of esteem. And foreseeing his master's certain displeasure at this, he made use of a curious
strategy; so he had observed that every time King Philip IV came down to the lower rooms to watch Velázquez paint, and saw a picture leaning with its face against the wall, His Majesty would turn it round, or order it to be turned round, to see what it was. With this in mind, Pareja placed a little picture by his own hand casually facing the wall. As soon as the King saw it, he went to turn it round, and at the same time Pareja, who was waiting for this opportunity, fell at his feet and desperately pleaded for protection from his master, without whose consent he had learned the art, and had made that painting with his own hand. Not content with doing what Pareja had begged, that magnanimous royal spirit also turned to Velázquez and said: \textit{Not only must you say no more about this, but be advised that someone who has such skill cannot be a slave.}\footnote{12}

Palomino constructed the anecdote about the Pareja’s manumission, which was not very common practice in Spain,\footnote{13} in order to solve the paradox of being a slave and a painter, and to justify the inclusion of the biography of the slave in his treatise on art. Once he had clarified the paradoxical position of Pareja, Palomino applied the biographical formula of linking the skill of the painter with his personal qualities: ‘And because of this noble deed [perpetual servitude], as well as for having had such honourable thoughts, and becoming eminent in Painting (notwithstanding the misfortune of his natural condition) he has appeared to be worthy of this place [...] he, by his honourable proceedings and his application, created a new being for himself and another, second nature.’ \footnote{14} Pareja’s qualities allowed Palomino to praise liberally the standard of his portraits: ‘Our Pareja had in particular a most singular talent for portraits, of which I have seen some that are most excellent, such as the one of José Ratés (Architect in this Court), in which one recognizes totally the manner of Velázquez, so that many believe it to be his.’\footnote{15} Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez added in 1800, in his \textit{Diccionario histórico}, that this confusion also existed between the portraits of Pareja and those of Juan Bautista del Mazo.\footnote{16}

The attention paid by Spanish art historiography to the extraordinary case of Pareja prevented him from being subsumed into the anonymous and indistinguishable mass of the majority of the master’s collaborators, with the exception of Juan Bautista del Mazo, son-in-law of Velázquez and painter to the Spanish court, who inherited Pareja’s services after the death of his father-in-law. Clarification of the independence of the Velázquez-inspired style of Pareja’s works, and the consistent aesthetic devaluation of his work, were the primary reasons that led to the only monographic study of Juan de Pareja in existence, published in 1957 by Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño.\footnote{17} The whereabouts of more than half the artistic output of Pareja assembled by the Spanish art historian is unknown: the \textit{Portrait of a Boy}, \textit{Lady Wearing a Nun’s Habit}, and \textit{Bust-length Portrait of a Gentleman}, which were attributed to Pareja in the sale catalogue of the Aguado Collection in 1843,\footnote{18} as well as the \textit{Presentation of the Christ Child in the Temple},\footnote{19} a \textit{St Barbara} signed by the artist and seen by the author on the art market,\footnote{20} and the four pictures which the traveller Antonio Ponz saw in the Chapel of St Rita in the prestigious Augustinian Monasterio de los Recoletos in Madrid: \textit{St John the Evangelist}, \textit{St John the Baptist}, \textit{St Orentius} and the \textit{Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico}.\footnote{21} Of the existing output of Pareja, Gaya Nuño cites the only two works recorded by Spanish art historiography: the \textit{Portrait of José Ratés}, mentioned by Palomino\footnote{22} and the \textit{Calling of St Matthew}, referred to by Ceán Bermúdez,\footnote{23} as well as those which survived the oblivion of art historiography and the lack of critical recognition: those signed and dated by the artist, the \textit{Flight into Egypt of 1658},\footnote{24} the \textit{Baptism of Christ of 1667},\footnote{25} the \textit{Mystic Marriage of St Catherine of 1669}, a year before his death\footnote{26} and the \textit{Portrait of a Capuchin Provincial}, whose recent restoration has
revealed Pareja’s signature and the date of 1651, thus dispelling doubts about the authorship of the work, which had been ascribed to lesser-known Madrid artists of the seventeenth century. It has also highlighted the relative artistic independence that Pareja achieved in the year of his manumission, even though he continued to lend his services to Velázquez. In the same museum (the Hermitage), there is another work by Pareja, the *Portrait of a Gentleman of the Order of Santiago*, signed on the back of the canvas, which Kagané believes to date from the 1630s.

Other pictures that Gaya Nuño lists as by the painter are the *Immaculate Conception*, which bears his signature, and the *Battle of the Hebrews and the Canaanites* in the University of Saragossa, with an inscription on a label on the back, which reads ‘Juan de Pareja (el mulato)/ año 1660-1/autor de la Vocación de San Mateo de Sevilla’ [Juan de Pareja (the mulatto)/year 1660-1/author of the Calling of St Matthew in Seville].

It is only in the last ten years or so that a certain interest in Pareja has been revived, prompted by the studies on the works of Velázquez, such as his portrait *Juan de Pareja*, that were published following the recent anniversary of the birth of Velázquez, and by the increase in Transatlantic studies on slavery within the Anglophone world in recent years.

The long obscurity in which the works of Pareja remained within the history of art was due not only to his situation as Velázquez’s collaborator. The legend of the slave painter, created by Palomino, was repeated in the Spanish sources, until it acquired the exaggeration of its ‘romantic ingredients’ from the second half of the nineteenth century on, ‘in articles which appeared [in Spain] in periodical publications of a popular nature on art’, and in 1965, in the famous novel *I, Juan de Pareja*, by the writer Elizabeth Borton of Treviño, which received a prize for children’s literature in the United States, the Newbery Medal, in 1966.

It is undeniable that the slave painter at the court of Philip IV aroused a certain curiosity in imperial Spain, as did his predecessor, the celebrated Spanish humanist of African descent, Juan Latino (1518? – c. 1594), who used his profession as a writer to achieve recognition as a free man. The stigmas of slavery and manumission, which were intimately linked to the prejudice against the skin colour of black slaves in Spanish society, contributed, in my opinion, to the fall into obscurity of the works of Pareja.

The ethnicity and social condition of Pareja have been, from the time of the brief eighteenth-century biography onwards, the constant parameters used by sources in Spain and elsewhere to measure the skill and quality of his works. This attitude, which denoted a certain anxiety around the encounter with the Other in the Spanish court in the Early Modern period, did not completely disappear with the passing of time, as the observations of Carl Justi, in the 1953 Spanish translation of the German scholar’s monograph of Velázquez of 1888 showed, when he commented on the Palomino legend which explained the portrait *Juan de Pareja* by Velázquez: “[Velázquez] wanted to do a trial piece before [the portrait of Innocent X] and found a subject close at hand in his servant, a dauber, the Moor Juan de Pareja. It was also an experiment to determine how a painter should proceed with an ugly head.” The opinions expressed, four years later by Gaya Nuño, who attacked Palomino for his ‘racist judgement which was very understandable in his time’, also demonstrate a certain ambiguity towards Pareja, whom he admired for the ‘great care’ he took to sign his works ‘in the reasonable hope they would avenge him for the social slights occasioned by the colour of his skin’. In his opinion, the lack of adherence of Pareja’s works to the Velázquez canon were evident in
the ‘compositional clumsiness’, ‘the undoubted compositional primitivism that was only countered by the picture in the Prado Museum’, in the ‘clumsy and ingenuous perspective’, in the mediocrity of his signed works, and in a certain ‘coarseness of the features and the large hands’ in the portrait José de Ratés, which he considered a ‘piece of exceptional worth which well deserves to become widely known’.38 The author acknowledged that the colouring ‘in his paintings of religious themes’ is ‘his gift and his strength, which compensate for his many errors’39 and stressed ‘that he was not a bad colourist, though certainly weak in invention, clumsy in composition but, on the other hand, not bad at drawing’, concluding by admitting that ‘he was an estimable painter’ who ‘had nothing servile about him’ and that ‘he has received little glory’.40 These characteristics, typical of a minor painter, were seen as a product of ‘the curious personality’ of Pareja, whom Gaya Nuño considered a ‘strange and impressionable mulatto, receptive to all influences’, and with an ‘original naivety’ which, in his opinion, ‘could almost be said to be the predecessor of that of the Douanier Rousseau’.41 The writer concluded that Pareja was a ‘skilful individual, personal in his most impersonal eclecticism, impressionable too’, and a ‘very nice creature, within his creational limits’.42

In Gaya Nuño’s monographic article, the prejudices about the mulatto, and the focus on Pareja’s style, contributed to the oblivion into which the artistic output of this Spanish artist fell. The author’s traditional artistic focus, which follows the familiar progress of the canonical art of the ‘maestro’ Velázquez, perpetuates the lack of recognition of the value of the creative and compositional differences of Pareja.

It is appropriate, in this context, to concentrate on Pareja’s Calling of St Matthew, in order to analyse the visual and religious discourses adopted by our artist to rescue himself from historical oblivion, thus immortalising the Pareja ‘case’ and its cultural function within the formation of the Spanish empire.43 In this painting, which remains in the Prado Museum stores in Madrid, Gaya Nuño interpreted Pareja’s whitening of his self-portrait as a means of ‘ennobling, falsifying and playing tricks with his own image, known from the magnificent Roman portrait by Don Diego, while failing to show pride in his race. Mulatto he continued to be, without doubt, but he depersonalized himself as much as possible’.44 Indeed, Pareja inserted himself as a secondary European figure, at the left edge of the composition, at the moment when Christ invites Matthew to give up his profession and follow him unconditionally.45 Before embarking on analysis of the visual discourses used by the artist in formulating his own identity, let us examine the composition into which Pareja inserted himself. In this sizeable canvas, we see that the central figure of Matthew, who is represented according to the western stereotype of the image of the Jew, is seated a table in front of the only column in his collector’s office, which divides the composition into two scenes: to the right, Christ and his three disciples and, to the left, a group of public employees and clients, placed between the foreground and the background, amongst whom is the only slave of African origin to be found in the composition. The figures all focus on Christ’s invitation to Matthew, with the exception of Pareja, who is the only one that directs his gaze towards the spectator. The artist depicts himself as a Spanish gentleman, and holds a paper in his hand on which can be read his signature and the date of 1661. In Matthew’s office a great wealth of material culture is displayed, including the carpet that covers the table, coins, jewels, sheets of paper, books, urns, and a picture hung on the wall in the background, containing an image of Moses and the Bronze Serpent. We need to examine the importance of the black slave, St Matthew, Christ and Moses in this religious context, so that we can understand the cultural significance of the visual parallels established by the artist between the case of Pareja and these figures. The central figure in the composition, Matthew, known as Levi before his
conversion to Christ’s cause, was a tax collector for the Romans, and for that reason was looked
down on by the Jews. Christianity would transform his social condition, and he became a disciple of
Christ and one of the evangelists. It is not difficult to imagine Pareja’s identification with Matthew,
not only because conversion to Christianity was a compulsory requirement for slaves in Spain, but
above all because Matthew was the apostle of Ethiopia. In the social imagery of Spain, Ethiopia
was associated with the classical world, where the word Ethiopian was used to refer to people of
African descent, and with Christianity, since Ethiopia was the first Christian nation. Pareja also
establishes a direct relationship between the evangelist, as instrument of the spiritual liberation of
the Ethiopians, and Moses, as liberator of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt, where Matthew also
preached. Moses and Christ, the liberator of humanity, wear the same robes, and Pareja places
himself at the other end of the table, opposite the Saviour. With these visual parallels, the artist
alludes to his identity as a Biblical Ethiopian and, therefore, a free man. A clear reference to
Matthew’s mission in Ethiopia is the face of the black slave, illuminated and at the same time
pierced by the light of Divine Grace that crowns the evangelist’s turban, and anticipates the
whitening of Pareja himself. The painter reminds his spectators that the black slave, Matthew and he
all belong to Ethiopia, cradle of the ‘old Christians’, and not to the Spain of the Habsburgs. The
imperial policies of ‘purity of blood’, which were developed from the middle of the fifteenth century
and the time of the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, brought about the exclusion not only of Jews,
but also of Muslims, Conversos, Moriscos, blacks and mulattos from the spheres of power in Spain.
The identity of Biblical Ethiopian gave Pareja the justification to represent himself as a Spanish
gentleman with a sword, a social attribute of ‘old Christians’. Pareja converts himself, through the
visual association he establishes with Matthew, into an example of assimilation into the Spanish
empire and, at the same time, proclaims his difference from the Moriscos and Conversos, whose
religions were considered enemies of the state, especially within the court, where the presence of
Morisco slaves was prohibited.

In representing himself as white, Pareja turned to the European iconographic example of the
Baptism of the Black Eunuch by St Philip, in which the neophyte, as a result of the sacrament,
acquires the appearance of a white European man. But why did the artist-gentleman differentiate
himself from the black page-slave in the composition? Pareja must certainly have posed himself the
problem of how to create a pictorial illusion that would communicate his new identity as a freedman
in a society in which the word ‘black’ was a synonym for ‘slave’, and in which spectators would have
been conscious of the predominant principles of physiognomy, according to which the qualities of
the soul could be deduced from facial features. The artist was conscious that the colour of his skin
would always reveal his previous condition as a slave, and it was essential that his spectators should
take into account his new condition as a freedman, since only people who were free could paint. If
Matthew could erase his past as a publican through his conversion to Christianity, Pareja could
proclaim his ‘second nature’. The artist had to resort to the artifices of his profession and create a
visual strategy that went beyond his identity as Biblical Ethiopian, and transcended the social stigma
of the colour of his skin and the dominant rules of physiognomy. In this way, the Spanish Catholic
public of the seventeenth century, who were obsessed by the statutes of purity of blood, could grasp
the new identity of Pareja as a freedman, despite his recourse to subversion of the genre of the self-
portrait, whose principal characteristic was the concept of likeness.

There is no doubt that Pareja’s critical fortunes determined not only the historical negation of his
identity but also that of his function as a cultural creator within a specific time and space. If we want
to rescue the works of a ‘minor’ artist from critical and historiographical oblivion, we need to re-
examine this highly fertile period in the history of Spanish art from a new, non-canonical perspective
which is based on a larger cultural and thematic contextualization of the visual material.

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NOTES


9 Palomino, ‘Juan de Pareja’, p. 960.

10 Ibid., pp. 960-1.

11 Ibid., p. 960. The debate over painting as a liberal activity continued to run in Spain during the eighteenth century, the activity having been considered a craft until the end of the previous century. Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, ‘El retrato clásico español’, in Fundación Amigos del Museo del Prado (ed.), *El retrato* (Barcelona: Galaxia Gutemberg, 2004), p. 228.

12 The italics in the text are those in Palomino, ‘Juan de Pareja’, p. 960. See also García Felguera, *op. cit.*, p. 175, note 109.


15 Palomino, ‘Juan de Pareja’, p. 961.

16 Ceán Bermúdez, *op. cit.*, p. 52.


18 Ibid., p. 284.

19 Ibid., p. 281.

20 Ibid., p. 283.
21 Antonio Ponz, Viaje de España en que se da noticia de las cosas más apreciables, y dignas de saberse, que hay en ella, V (Madrid: D. Joaquín Ibarra, Printer, 1776), p. 55. These paintings were also recorded by Ceán Bermúdez, op. cit., p. 52.
22 See note 17 of this article. Gaya Nuño, op. cit., p. 282, mentions a label on the back of the canvas of José de Ratés (Museo de Bellas Artes, Valencia), which stated the name of the sitter and the author.
23 This work is in the Prado Museum’s stores. Ceán Bermúdez, op. cit., p. 52; and Gaya Nuño, op. cit., pp. 277-8.
26 Ibid., pp. 279-80. The painting is in the parish church of Santa Olaja de Eslonza, in the province of Leon.
28 Kagané, op. cit., pp. 318, 322, 477.
29 Gaya Nuño, op. cit., p. 281. The painting is in the Ordóñez Collection in Madrid.
30 Ibid., p. 280.
33 García Felguera, op. cit., p. 178, note 120.
37 Gaya Nuño, op. cit., p. 273.
38 Ibid., pp. 279, 280, 282, 284.
39 Ibid., p. 281.
40 Ibid., pp. 284-5.
41 Ibid., pp. 276, 278.
42 Ibid., p. 284.
43 This work (225 x 325 cm) by Pareja did not form part of a religious series. Neither the identity of the client, nor the function of the work is known, but the fleur-de-lys, symbol of the Farnese family, on the canvas indicates that it belonged to Queen Isabella Farnese, wife of Philip V. I am grateful to Dr Javier Portús for advising me on this matter. For a more detailed study of this painting, see Fracchia, op. cit., in press.
44 Gaya Nuño, op. cit., p. 277.
45 The episode is related in the Gospel of St Matthew (9:9).
49 The story of Moses and the serpent of metal, which is told in Numbers (21:4-9), foretells the effect of the death and resurrection of Christ, see also the Gospel of St John (3:13-15).
54 Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (1611), edited by Martín de Riquer (Barcelona: Horta, 1987), p. 908, defines a portrait as: ‘the copied figure of an important person of some standing, whose effigy and likeness it is right to commemorate for future centuries’. 