

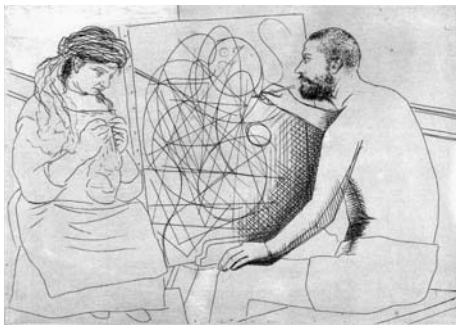
## LESSON TWO: The Artist at Work



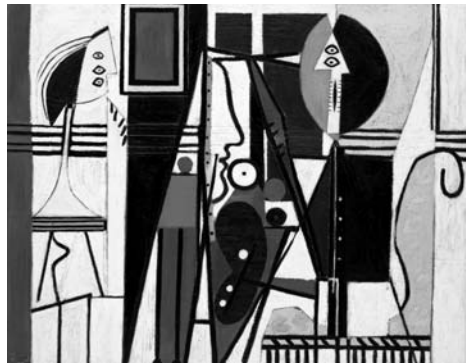
**IMAGE FOUR:** Diego Velázquez. 1599–1660. *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV*. 1656. Oil on canvas, 10' 5" x 9' 1" (318 x 276 cm). Museo del Prado, Madrid. Photo by Erich Lessing/Art Resource, New York



**IMAGE FIVE:** Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Las Meninas (Group)*. 1957. Oil on canvas, 2' ½" x 8' ½" (194 x 260 cm). Museu Picasso, Barcelona. Donated by the Artist. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**IMAGE SIX:** Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Peintre et modèle tricotant* (*Painter and model knitting*) from *Le Chef-d'oeuvre inconnu* by Honoré de Balzac. Etchings executed 1927–1931, published 1931. Etching from an illustrated book of 13 etchings and 67 wood engravings. Plate: 7 7/16 x 10 15/16" (19.3 x 27.8 cm); page: 12 3/16 x 9 15/16" (33 x 25.2 cm). Publisher: Ambroise Vollard, Éditeur, Paris. Printer: Louis Fort and Aimé Jourde, Paris. Edition: 340. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Louis E. Stern Collection, 1964. © 2006 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York



**IMAGE SEVEN:** Pablo Picasso. Spanish, 1881–1973. *Painter and Model*. 1928. Oil on canvas, 51 ½ x 64 ¼" (129.8 x 163 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. The Sidney and Harriet Janis Collection. © 2006 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

## INTRODUCTION

Often artists not only record their likeness in **self-portraits**, but also represent themselves at work with the elements or tools of their craft—easel, palette, model, and/or other works of art. Such images of the artist at work serve to accord importance to his or her craft and articulate the artist's role relative to society. By creating images of themselves at work, artists position themselves in relation to other artists who have also represented themselves in this manner. In this way they self-consciously place their work in dialogue with the history of art. Picasso participated in this tradition not only by creating representations of himself at work, but also by creating his own versions of another artist's self-representation.

## LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider how an artist relates to other artists and artworks in the history of art.
- Students will explore how an artist chooses to share information about his or her process.
- Students will consider how an artist communicates ideas relating to his or her role in society.
- Students will consider how an artist renders his point of view or perception of an experience as an image.

## INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

- Organize your students into pairs. Assign one student to be the “drawer” and the other to be the “describer.” Give the drawer pencil and paper and give the describer an image—it can be a reproduction, a postcard, or a picture from a newspaper or magazine. The describer must describe the object to the drawer; the drawer must not see the image. The drawers should draw what they hear being described, and the describers should limit their comments to their description of the image—they must not comment on the drawing that is being created. There are various additional rules that can be applied to this exercise, for instance: the drawer is not allowed to ask the describer any questions, the describer is not allowed to see what the drawer is drawing, etc. Decide which rules you want to apply or take turns trying them all out. The activity works best when the drawers and describers switch roles. After ten minutes of describing and drawing, your students should discuss the process. Ask them what was the most challenging part of the exercise. Talk to your students about the ways in which individual perception and language play into this exercise.
- To further explore differences between what is seen and what is recorded or documented, identify four areas in your classroom. Ask students in each of the areas to focus on another area and take ten minutes to sketch or write a descriptive paragraph about what is going on in that area. Have your students share their observations with the rest of the class. Ask your students if their descriptions reflect what is going on in the room as a whole. How does each student's observation reflect his or her particular point of view? Are any descriptions within a group the same? Ask your students why this might or might not be the case. What does this reveal about their point of view?

## IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas* or *The Family of Philip IV* and Picasso's *Las Meninas (Group)* and ask them to select five words that describe each of the paintings. Ask them to share their descriptive words with the class. Inform your students that “Las Meninas” means “the maids-in-waiting.”

- **Three hundred years separate these works. Ask your students to place them in what they think is the chronological order. Ask them to use visual evidence to explain their decision.**

Velázquez (1599–1660), court painter to Philip IV of Spain, was given a studio in the royal palace in which to create works of art for the king as well as **portraits** and grand paintings documenting the king’s achievements.

In *Las Meninas*, Velázquez depicts himself pausing in the act of painting, demonstrating that his craft requires action and reflection. Indeed, all the figures seem to be caught in an instance between one position and another: the maids are in the process of leaning in toward the princess, who is in the process of turning her head; a couple in the **background** engage in a conversation; a man on the stairs casts a backward glance before proceeding on his way; and a small boy in the foreground mischievously nudges a dog with his foot.

Amid the many large works of art hung in the room, a mirror beside the open door reflects the image of King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. They appear to be looking at their five-year-old daughter and her entourage, which includes maids-in-waiting, a dwarf (a common fixture in the Spanish royal court at the time), and a dog. Indeed, they are the subject of the painting Velázquez is working on, but the painter has given himself prominence and thereby accorded himself more importance. In this sense, the painting is both a portrait of the royal family and a self-portrait of the artist that not only shows us what he looks like and how he works, but also his notoriety: the royal family are his clients—they come to him to have their portrait painted.

- **Having shared this information with your class, ask your students to imagine what is depicted on Velázquez’s canvas in this painting. Have your students support their description with details of the room’s spatial arrangement. Velázquez is actually creating a portrait of the king and queen, which we see reflected in the mirror.**
- **Ask your students to list the various characters in the painting in order of importance, based on their observation of the arrangement of the composition.**

As a teen-ager Picasso had gone to see *Las Meninas* in the Museo del Prado, where it still hangs, and made copies of it. Later on in his career, when he was a well-known artist, he copied *Las Meninas* again, feeling that he must study and understand the great artists who had preceded him. Rather than make an exact replica of the painting, he created over fifty versions inspired by it. Several years prior to this project, Picasso had hypothesized the following:

If someone set out to copy *Las Meninas*, in all good faith, let’s say, when getting to a certain point, and if the person doing the copying were me, I would say to myself: how would it be if I put this one a little to the right or the left? I would try to do it in my way, forgetting Velázquez. The attempt would lead me, certainly, to modify the light or change it, because of having moved a figure around. So, little by little, I would paint my *Meninas* which would appear detestable to the professional copyist; they wouldn’t be the ones he would believe he had seen in Velázquez’s canvas, but they would be “my” *Meninas*. . .”<sup>5</sup>

- **Having read this passage aloud to your students, ask them to identify what changes Picasso made to Velázquez’s *Las Meninas*. Ask them to consider how the meaning of the painting has changed based on his modifications. Students might observe that Picasso has made the painter much larger in his version, and that the mirror now seems to reflect one face rather than two.**

- As court painter, Velázquez was responsible for documenting his time. However, Picasso recognized that the artist's primary concern was not simply to create a replica of what he saw, but to communicate information about what he saw in a very particular way. As Picasso noted, "Velasquez [*sic*] left us his idea of the people of his epoch. Undoubtedly they were different from what he painted them, but we cannot conceive a Philip IV in any other way than the one Velasquez painted."<sup>6</sup>
- Ask your students to come up with other examples where the experience of an event and the record of it in writing, photograph, newspaper report, or television broadcast were different. Your students may also ask their parents or grandparents to identify a significant historical event they experienced. Ask your students to research this event and collect historical documents—photographs, newspapers, broadcasts—and present them to the person who initially described the event, interviewing that person with respect to similarities and differences between his or her experience and the historical documents.

To further explore the concept of truth in art, read the following statement by Picasso to your students: "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."<sup>7</sup>

- Show your students *Painter and model knitting* and ask them to describe what is happening in the picture. What might Picasso want the viewer to understand about the process of creating art? Although the artist seems to closely observe his model, a woman knitting, what appears on his canvas is an abstract web of lines that does not seem to capture the likeness of the woman at all.

This etching is one of a series of illustrations for a book of short stories by the French writer Honoré de Balzac. The story, titled "The Unknown Masterpiece," is about a seventeenth-century artist who for ten years worked on one painting of a nude that, upon completion, was an abstract image only he understood.

- Show your students *Painter and Model* and ask them to list the elements of the painting. In the center of the image is a canvas, before which sits the artist, in a yellow chair, pallet in hand. He appears to have outlined a profile on the canvas based on the model at left, which may in fact have been one of his own sculptures on a pedestal. The contour of the painted profile, however, is closer to Picasso's own than the model. In addition, the image on the canvas seems more realistic, less abstracted than the remainder of the painting, with its simple, flat, geometric shapes. A framed work of art and two windows appear in the background, above the horizontal lines of the room's modeling, which runs across the painting.
- Ask your students to compare *Painter and model knitting* and *Painter and Model*. Both works of art are about creating art. The artist in each looks at a model, but what is ultimately depicted is not a realistic or representational version of what he sees.
- Continue the discussion of these works by reading the following statement by Picasso aloud to your students:

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There's no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have left an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions. Ideas and emotions will in the end be prisoners in his work. Whatever they do, they can't escape from the picture.<sup>8</sup>

6. Pablo Picasso, *Statement*, in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, 264.

7. Ibid., 264.

8. Ibid., 270.

### ACTIVITY

Return to Picasso's statement about art and truth: "We all know that Art is not truth. Art is a lie that makes us realize truth, at least the truth that is given us to understand. The artist must know the manner whereby to convince others of the truthfulness of his lies."<sup>9</sup>

Next, read the following excerpt from John Keats's poem "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which also considers art's relation to truth and beauty:

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,"—that is all  
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.<sup>10</sup>

Ask your students to come up with definitions of beauty. Now ask them for definitions of truth. Alternatively, your students may form two groups, both of which should focus on just one of the words. The groups may then compare their definitions.

Organize a classroom debate in which students argue for and against the idea that art must be beautiful or must represent truth.

9. Ibid, 264.

10. John Keats, "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *The Oxford Book of English Verse: 1250–1900*. Arthur Quiller-Couch, ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1919).