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Painting and Vision in Spanish Art of the Golden Century

Around 1580, when El Greco painted *Saint John's Vision at Patmos* (now in the Museo de Santa Cruz, Toledo), the iconography of the Immaculate Conception had not yet reached its full development. The most important feature of this painting is the position of Saint John's half-length portrait in the left foreground. The perceptive habits of Western beholders lead them to start decoding a painting at precisely that point. This has two important consequences. On the one hand, the viewer is asked to see the vision through Saint John's eyes, and on the other, John himself is presented as a beholder, or rather as an integrated beholder. He is an ambivalent figure, as he plays both the part of the viewer and that of the "visionary." In this perspective, El Greco's painting seems to propose a complex relation between the painting and the vision. The beholder sees a painting (El Greco's) representing a vision (Saint John's), which is itself nothing else than an image sprung from the "divine paintbrush."

Forty years later, Velázquez painted his *Saint John* (National Gallery, London). The iconography of this painting is not new. It draws on a solution that was fairly common in the Netherlands and which Velázquez could have known through various engravings. If we compare the painting with its probable models, however, we can easily see the new elements introduced by the Spanish painter. Jan Sadeler's engraving of the same subject, on which Velázquez probably drew, is divided by a powerful diagonal into halves: the right one is filled by the visionary, the left one by the vision. In Velázquez' work, Saint John dominates the painting, whereas the vision is confined to one side. The saint is monumental, the vision is minute and almost illegible.

If Sadeler's engraving (or a similar one) can be considered as a starting point for Velázquez' work, it is reasonable to question what led Velázquez to such obvious changes. One answer emerges: Velázquez reduced the vision because he developed it in another painting, *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*. Fortunately, the two paintings, both from Seville, are today in the same museum (National Gallery, London) and can be contemplated together, as the painter no doubt meant them to be.

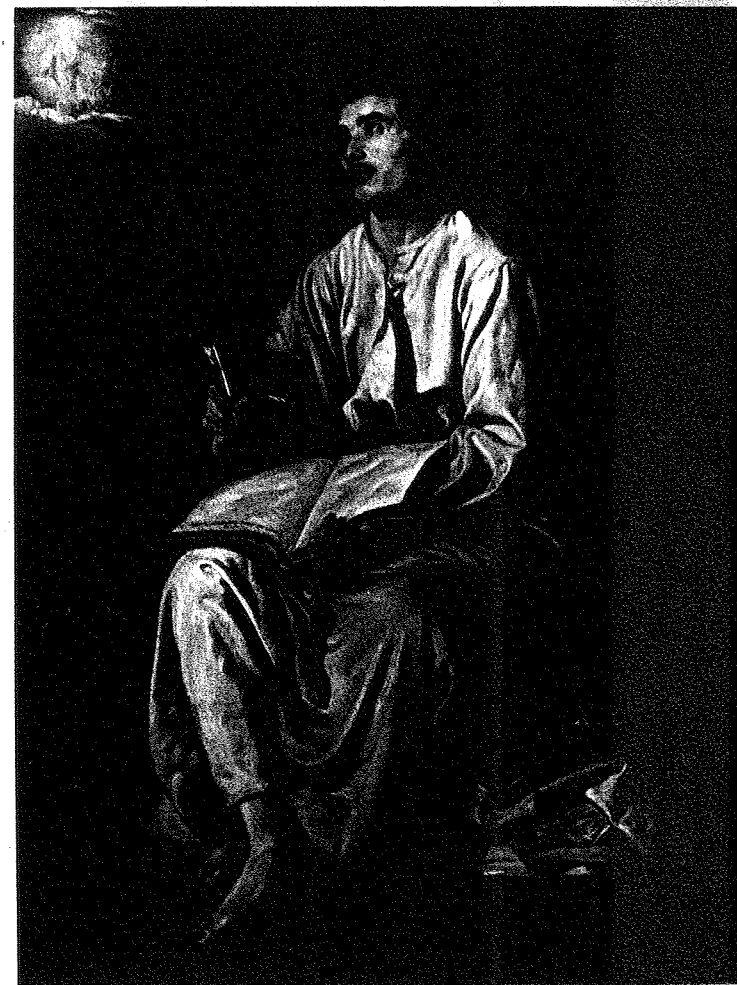
I do not know of any other case in which Saint John's vision in Patmos and the Immaculate Conception are represented in two juxtaposed paintings. The explanation for this must take into account the artist's tendency toward double representation, which he displayed as early as his Seville period and which would lead to justly famous results. I would even go so far as to say that the London "diptych" is a result of Velázquez' confrontation with one of the main representational problems of his time, namely the relation between the vision and the painting. The theme of this double work is the passage from one representation to the other.

The framing of the great sign is tantamount to a process of visual and conceptual



Diego Velázquez, *The Virgin of the Immaculate Conception*, c. 1620. National Gallery, London

clarification: the Virgin emerges from the clouds surrounding the apocalyptic woman, the "sign" becomes "image." We could even say that with this passage Velázquez monumentally staged the whole problem of the relationship between the apocalyptic vision and the devotional image of the Immaculate Conception. The attentive beholder has the privilege to indirectly watch the making of an image. The "making" takes place in the interstice between the two "volets." The painting of the Immaculate Conception fills up, as it were, the blank page on which Saint John only had time to mark two lines: "A great sign appeared in the



Diego Velázquez, *Saint John the Evangelist on the Island of Patmos*, c. 1620. National Gallery, London

sky." The great painting is a hypotyposis, that is, a visualization of the text (Revelation 12:1): "A woman! The sun is shrouding her, the moon is at her feet, and twelve stars crown her head." I would like to suggest that Velázquez became familiar with the rhetorical concept of hypotyposis in Seville at the studio-academy of his teacher and father-in-law Pacheco.

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