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Making Sense of an Artwork: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of Participants' Accounts of Viewing a Well-Known Painting

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This work explores the meaning-making activities described by participants as they viewed a well-known painting. Research into aesthetic engagement has implicated an array of cognitive, affective, and perceptual processes. Types and aspects of artworks and of viewers have been investigated and a wide range of contextual factors have been identified as influential on viewer and viewed. The complexity of aesthetic experience is such that increasingly, a multidisciplinary approach toward its study has been encouraged. Despite this, experiential investigations into art-viewing are few. This study involves interviews with 12 participants, each conducted while viewing *Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez. Using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, three Group Experiential Themes were derived. Of these, "Meaning-Making, Interpretative Content," is presented singly to allow for depth of discussion. This theme captures participants' interpretative activities during viewing, exploring how they made sense of what they saw. Considerations of temporality, historicity, and social context were particularly prominent. Keywords: interpretative phenomenological analysis, IPA, art, art viewing, aesthetics

Empirical research concerning aesthetics continues to reveal new levels of complexity regarding our interactions with visual art. Numerous models have been developed to account for the rich and diverse factors which have been implicated in the art-viewing experience. Broadly, such models (examples include Bullot & Reber, 2013; Leder et al., 2004; Pelowski et al., 2017) attempt to capture art-viewing in its entirety, identifying and relating inputs and outputs via a series of cognitive, affective, and sensory processes.

The factors implicated in aesthetic experience have also received independent focus. Consideration of inputs commonly involves distinguishing viewer characteristics, such as level of art-expertise (Mullennix & Robinet, 2018), or perceptual style (Boccia et al., 2014), from those of the image, such as whether it is representational or abstract (Schepman et al., 2015). Outputs are similarly diverse and have included measures of emotion and preference (van Paasschen et al., 2015), understanding and appreciation (Swami, 2013), and (dis)pleasingness (Plumhoff & Schirillo, 2009).

As such work suggests, experimental approaches to art-viewing have distinguished many influential elements and furthered our understanding of this demanding area. However, conversely, the categorization and quantification of engagement with art is, arguably, challenging, as it calls for reliance upon constructs that are often ambiguous and resist delineation. Upon what basis do we determine what makes someone an art expert or novice? Where is the line between abstract and representational? Can we fully untangle what underlies a response such as liking (e.g., how it relates to ratings of beauty: Sidhu et al., 2018), or decide whether this liking is best considered a judgement rather than an emotion? And, if we do decide such concepts are meaningfully distinguishable, is any boundary which we might establish between them (e.g., static compared to dynamic scenes: Massaro et al., 2012), robust enough to support experimentation? Does the distinction of artworks and their properties, from viewers and theirs, separate viewer from viewed in an artificial fashion and fail to capture what is inexorably both?

Reflecting the complexity of the multiple, interconnected factors implicated in aesthetic responding, and the demands of their definition and measurement, van Paasschen et al., (2015, p. 1) surmised: “there is no consensus in the literature on which mechanisms underlie our perception of art or what exactly defines an aesthetic experience”. Taking this picture as a starting point, the potential for alternative explorative approaches to contribute to our understanding is evident. Indeed, topics associated with a particularly intricate association of individual and contextual aspects, or which might be especially demanding in terms of experimental design, often lend themselves to the lens of qualitative research to access “the parts other methods cannot reach” (Pope & Mays, 1995 p. 1). Rather than trying to circumvent or control the subjectivity which is arguably inherently bound up in art-viewing, qualitative approaches cultivate a recognition and integration of our unique position in the world as self-referential beings, to offer an alternative way of investigating human issues.

A number of promising qualitative studies have thus far considered art-viewing. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) conducted 57 interviews with museum professionals

concerning their interactions with artworks. Four experiential dimensions, Perpetual, Emotional, Intellectual, and Communicative, were derived. These dimensions were notably complex, consisting of multiple sub-dimensions and intra-category polarities. Lagerspetz (2016) presented 82 interviewees with two images: *The Persistence of Memory* (1931) by Salvador Dalí, and *Which Link Fails First?* (1992), by Finnish artist Teemu Mäki. Findings were similarly intricate. *In vivo* coding revealed 40 variables including familiarity, intrigue, preference, beauty, and affective evaluation.

Phenomenological approaches in particular, have been identified as advantageous for studying phenomena that are complex and abstruse (LeVasseur, 2003). Although there is heterogeneity within such approaches, they share the aim to “remain open to new understanding—to be open to the phenomenon—in order to go beyond what they already know from experience or through established knowledge.” (Finlay, 2013, p. 175). Such an aim allows researchers to be unencumbered by the difficulties associated with experiential work described. Rather than trying to model or explain a phenomenon, researchers aim to understand and get close to what is experienced by human subjects, potentially allowing the development of new or different ways to think about it.

Tone Roald has offered notable insights into the potential for phenomenology to contribute to art-viewing research (Roald, 2007, 2008). Participants in Roald’s work were interviewed following gallery visits and discussions concerned multiple images. A similar approach was adopted by On Tam (2008), who noted the difficulties participants seemingly experienced in understanding or expressing their responses to the viewed artworks. Such work indicates both the potentials and challenges associated with turning a qualitative and/or phenomenological lens toward art-viewing. Investigation unconstrained by the categories of quantification can be facilitative, but conversely, the ambit of such study needs to retain appropriate focus. Roald (2008) for example, usefully concentrated on “the first aesthetic meeting”, rather than “dive deeply into the particular constituents of the experiences” (p. 200).

In light of the desirability of an unconstrained yet nevertheless focused approach, and to access what is arguably missing from much of art-viewing research, a central aim in this study was to try to gather rich, detailed, and fine-grained accounts of encounters with art. To do so, an inductive and idiographic approach, and an adequately specific, yet sufficiently non-prescriptive, research question, were sought. It was, therefore, decided to explore the encounter with a single artwork, rather than interactions with artworks. Inductivity and idiography are key tenets underlying Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith et al., 2022), a methodology that involves exploration of experience on “its own terms” rather than as directed by “predefined or overly abstract categories” (p. 1). IPA was, therefore, adopted to consider the question *What is it like to look at a painting?*

IPA sits within a wider body of phenomenological methodologies which differ in how they approach the goal of exploring lived experience. Descriptive (e.g. Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994), and hermeneutic or interpretative (e.g. Van Manen, 1990), methods are commonly distinguished. Smith and Nizza (2021), for example, compare the interpretation central to IPA, with the descriptive phenomenology developed by Giorgi (1997). In the latter, rather than being interpretative, essential meaning units or underlying ‘essences’ are identified in order to generate a descriptive and generic summary of the experience in question. Such endeavor is contrasted to the idiographic, case-by-case concern with personal sense-making, involved in IPA. Here researchers aim to develop rich accounts of phenomena by attending to the patterns, in all their convergence and divergence, of experience across a group of individuals. The interpretative activity, of both participant and researcher, is considered integral to the process.

Art-viewing is, intuitively, an engagement infused with interpretative activity and indeed the meaning of ‘art’ itself is a huge and diverse concept. Much as experimental design calls for the delineation of variables, defining a research question or topic in this area is an inevitably interpretative act. IPA is a methodology that provides a means to explore such meaning-making while rigorously acknowledging the role of researcher and participant interpretation. Combined

with the prior described commitments to idiography and inductivity, it appeared ideally suited to the research aims. To facilitate focus, this research considered paintings specifically. IPA commonly makes use of semi-structured interviews and during this study, these were conducted while the researcher and participant viewed a painting. There was no claim to replicate or capture a singular aesthetic experience in its exactitude simply by conducting the interview in the moment. Rather, by interviewing each participant while looking at an image, the hope was to become closer to the experience involved.

Method

Participants/recruitment

IPA requires a fairly homogeneous sample, while recognizing that determining the criteria for this homogeneity is itself an interpretative issue (Smith et al., 2022). Participants were self-described art-enthusiasts. In order to resist presumptive definitions, no strict criteria categorized art enthusiasm. Recruitment was purposive and appealed for people who “liked art, were interested in art and would be comfortable to talk about art”.

There are many types of viewers, from the naive to the reluctant, all waiting to be investigated. Art-enthusiasts were chosen as it was anticipated that they were people who naturally engaged in the experience of interest. Furthermore, it seemed judicious to select a group who would be relatively comfortable and able (from their perspectives) to discuss a painting. Participants with formal training, or a vocation in art or art history, were excluded. The rationale was that professional experience could provide different or additional discourses which might shape discussion, particularly given the weight of literature regarding differences between experts and novices. Such participants are of legitimate interest, but a different study. The final sample (n=12) consisted of six men and six women aged between 35 and 65. Their openness and generosity were notable. Ethical Approval for the project was granted by the Birkbeck Research Ethics Committee. Consent was obtained before each interview.

The interview

All participants viewed *Las Meninas* by Diego Velázquez (1656) (Figure 1). This choice was informed by investigation and intuition. Listings of favorite paintings, and artistically inclined friends and colleagues, were consulted. Participants were not pre-informed of the painting to be viewed. The image was viewed as an A2 reproduction. There is a wealth of literature considering reproductions in art (e.g. Locher et al., 2001), and the ecological validity of viewings (Pelowski et al., 2017), and arguments could be constructed supporting different positions. The present work aimed to avoid becoming overly directed by existing notions of any right way to view art.

An interview schedule was developed based on the extant literature and observations made during preliminary gallery visits (such as the types of conversations held by visitors). Questions were open-ended such as “What are your first impressions of this painting?” and “Can you tell me what it’s like to look at the painting?”. The interview schedule was used as a guide allowing discussions to be participant lead and facilitate the pursual of ideas and topics introduced by the interviewees. Each of these audio-recorded conversations lasted approximately an hour.

Analysis followed the steps laid out in Smith and Nizza., (2021) and Smith et al., (2022). Please note that in these two new books, the leading IPA researchers have offered a modified and slightly refined terminology for parts of the analysis. We are following this new terminology in this paper. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and immediately anonymized. To maintain idiography, each transcript was analyzed independently before moving on to the next.

In each case, the transcript was read several times for familiarization, then initial notes concerning language, recurring motifs, and points of interest were made. These notes were next developed into a series of “experiential statements” (Smith & Nizza, 2021, p. 38) capturing interesting and significant aspects of the participant’s account. Smith and Osborn (2008) note “the skill at this stage is finding expressions which are high level enough to allow theoretical

connections within and across cases but which are still grounded in the particularity of the specific thing said.” (p. 68).

Patterns and relationships between these themes were then explored by clustering those with meaningful connections. Care was taken to look for areas of both convergence and divergence within the data, and to regularly check the original transcript to ensure interpretations were grounded in the participant’s words. The result was a series of clusters representing personal (i.e., for the individual) experiential themes and sub-themes.

Once all 12 transcripts were analyzed, they were compared to identify patterns across cases. This involved collecting the personal experiential themes for each participant and clustering them into group experiential themes. During group analysis, it is recommended to consider how many participants a theme is evident for. Guidance suggesting a theme should be present for at least two-thirds of participants (Smith, 2011; Smith et al., 2022) was followed.

The Painting

INSERT PAINTING FIGURE 1 HERE

Figure 1 Las Meninas - Diego Velázquez

Results

Table 1 Summary of Group Experiential Themes and Sub-Themes

Group Experiential Theme 1: The Gaze	Group Experiential Theme 2: Meaning-Making: Interpretative Content	Group Experiential Theme 3: The Self-Conscious Viewer: Concerns with the ‘right’ way to view art
Intersubjectivity Implications	Families and Social Structures Juxtapositions and Tensions	Getting it right Getting it real: the authenticity of my response

Through the analysis, three Group Experiential Themes (sometimes called GETs: Smith & Nizza, 2021, p. 54) were developed (Table 1). The first, *The Gaze*, concerned viewers’ senses of reciprocal eye-contact, perceived between themselves and figures depicted in the painting.

This exchange of gazes led viewers to become aware of, and make sense of, their own personhood and that of the characters. This exchange of gazes also led viewers to consider who they and the characters were, or became, in relation to one another (*Intersubjectivity*). This was not without consequence, and the feelings provoked (*Implications*), included those of being seemingly evaluated or judged, by the gazing figures. This GET has been published in Starr and Smith (2021). GET three, *The Self-Conscious Viewer*, captured the way participants questioned and sometimes revised the voracity of their responses in light of notions of how art ought to be viewed, and the context of existing understandings about paintings.

GET two, *Meaning-Making: Interpretative Content*, is presented here singly to allow for depth of discussion. It involves participants' ideas of what was portrayed in the painting, as they emerged and developed during the viewing. In the interviews, discussion of what was depicted and what this meant, unfolded organically and constituted a prominent aspect of the viewing experience as a whole. These concerns were thus inductively developed into a group experiential theme, to reflect the centrality afforded them by the participants. The theme concerns the interpretative activity which occurred during viewing and gives insight into the sense-making undertaken by the viewers. It is organized into two subthemes. First, in *Families and Social Structures*, viewers consider how cultural and social contexts might be reflected in the image and shape their responses to it. In *Juxtapositions and Tensions*, more abstract impressions of what sense-making when viewing art is like, are explored.

Families and Social Structures

Participants considered the characters in the painting and how they might relate to one another, with particular reference to notions of family. Local narratives tied to depicted figures were offered, accompanied by broader considerations of social values and boundaries associated with different families beyond the frame. In the following extract, William describes one such sense of family which he identified in the depiction. He refers initially to the male figure in the rear of the image, standing on the stairs:

“And this could be the father perhaps and he’s you know commissioned to make this this port... group... this group portrait of his family.... Um there is something about status about it and a real sense of that... of um... that these are people from a certain point in history, background and a certain status and placing that through painting.”

William uses the term “*through painting*” to describe how he feels art may convey meaning. The word *through* potentially has a double meaning here. It could be understood in the sense of ‘use as a tool’ and also to mean to ‘channel’ or ‘pass through’. As we consider the participants’ interpretive accounts, this twofold nature of ‘through’ may be a useful way to help us think about a special thickness present in them. ‘Throughs’ pervade William’s description; the status of the family in the image, channeled through time, using the tool of paint.

William’s interpretation locates a family within their wider social context. He identifies a father figure, a social class, and a historical context for this household. It is with fascinating ease that William extends his created family narrative, backwards into a period before the existence of the painting suggesting “*he’s you know commissioned to make this this port... group... this group portrait of his family*”. He imagines a narrative that extends through and beyond the physical and temporal bounds of the artwork, while simultaneously perceiving the painting as a tool through which permanent historical documentation is made.

Like William, most of the viewers foregrounded issues of social status. A familial structure, intimated through relations between depicted characters and embedded in a story of wider social significance, was commonly constructed. Gwen too described the character on the staircase as a ‘father’:

“Again I think father figure looking wistfully back so you do feel there’s this sort of maybe change happening in how the family is perceived and what the family is erm slightly moving away from the former court sort of aristocrat scene to a more bourgeois family.”

Here Gwen describes the figure as “*looking wistfully back*” as though leaving the setting somewhat mournfully. She extends this interpreted action metaphorically, to represent the leaving behind of an old mode of familial life and the introduction of a new regime.

Again, there appear to be layers of interpretative work that Gwen is doing here. She is conceptualizing a narrative about the people in the room and imagining how they relate to one another. She talks about the father ‘figure’, perhaps reflecting a degree of ambiguity or flexibility in her interpretation, perhaps suggesting this figure represents a role as well as an individual. She is also seemingly thinking about the physical mechanics of the situation; the character is leaving the room rather than entering it, thus oriented in three-dimensional space and granted a momentum and temporality. In addition, Gwen imagines the demeanor of this man, his wistfulness, and considers the social context of that feeling. She constructs a social metaphor delivered through the familial narrative.

Like William, Gwen’s interpretative engagement seems to involve multiple imaginings; from the private feelings of the father character and the physical direction of his movement, through to a higher-order social allegory. Her interpretation is rich and thick with apprehensions and ideas, and these appear to be manipulated simultaneously and interactively. Oliver too considered a developing family structure:

“It’s capturing a moment in the erm how do you say – sort of generation or evolution of their family and they could be wealthy, you know, landowners, to monarchy to whoever. So there’s something they they’re trying to say about the new generation I reckon – moving forward.”

In this extract, Oliver, like Gwen, appears to be recounting an impression of momentum and change, both local and in a wider social context. However, whereas Gwen saw a departure, Oliver sees an advance; a depiction of generation and evolution. The image as seen by Oliver, describes the progressive social status of the family. The “*new generation*” is new not only by age, but also by the way they relate to the world around them.

Some viewers saw the image as a more explicit social commentary than others. For Jay, for example, the painting suggested a direct comment by the painter Velázquez upon the status of the Spanish Royals:

“Placing the dog so centrally as well. You know, from a modern perspective it almost does feel like a satirical comment. The King and Queen at the back in a mirror – the dog even in front of the Infanta... and ... you know I’m not saying position expresses rank but somehow you feel that that should be more somehow more in the background to express prominence and precedence but it’s not...”

Jay saw the image as a critical observation of the Spanish Monarchy, much like today’s political cartoons. He suggested that the positioning of certain figures represented a form of mockery; the dog foregrounding the princess, the King and Queen mere background reflections. In the extract, it appears that Jay recognizes the hierarchy of these characters at the time of their painting and his position, viewing from a different time. What is striking, is the way that the interplay between these perspectives, his modern lens and that of the image in historical context, and in addition his awareness of these contrasts, overlap without disrupting his viewing.

Jay’s interpretation was nuanced. He did not rely solely on the physical position of the figures, which he suggested would be too overt: *“I’m not saying position expresses rank”*. Rather, he also perceived a tone, or sense of, from the image - *“but somehow you feel”*, as though some other part of the painting or experience of looking at it, contributed to this interpretation. Notably, this contribution was not explicitly visible on the canvas. Such responding reoccurred in other viewers’ interpretations regarding the family they saw depicted:

“Kids from this era from a family that obviously has land and property er have children so highly dressed almost like ornaments there’s a real ornamental feel about them.”

William described the children in the image as having an ornamental *“feel”* as though they were on display. He related this sense to what he believed about the family’s wealth and

property. The children too were objects to be possessed, “*highly dressed*” and presented as symbols of this same wealth. Oliver also described inferences associated with the family structure but beyond those directly depicted:

“There is er a painting of a couple in the background so some reference to historic relations of the scene I guess. Er the little girl is being dressed or gotten ready for something perhaps her um what would then be a kind of christening or something. um there’s a rather uglier [laughs] kind of daughter or relation looking at me possibly saying ‘it could have been me’. Er there’s also a guy in the back in a dark dress or suit or clothing rather, again there’s some kind of symbolism erm so there’s some preparations going on I’m not entirely sure what but it’s important and it’s important the moment is captured so yes...”

In this extract, Oliver describes a family transition deliberately set within external historical reference points, as well as the internal monologues and personal narratives of the characters. The “*little girl*” is being prepared for some kind of ceremony, perhaps a rite of passage or conversion from one period in life to the next. The “*uglier*” “*daughter*” is jealous, and Oliver gets a sense of this communicated through the intimacy of eye-contact.

The temporality that Oliver imagines is complex. The direct communicative look he describes from the “*uglier*” “*daughter*” is perceived to be occurring in the moment, both for the character and himself, despite their being positioned at different points in time. When discussing the painting within the painting, Oliver also references history as relative to the time of the image. Seemingly, so accepted and vital is the image world, that referencing multiple time-points, on multiple timelines, happens naturally as part of the interpretation.

Furthermore, Oliver can recognize elements of the image to be symbolic and important without knowing exactly what they symbolize. Like the ‘feel’ or ‘sense of’ described by William and Jay, what is not readily visible may still be strongly perceived. This was also suggested by Beth:

“So it’s all set out to look wealthy and um well cared for and precious to the point of a child being particularly a girl child in those terms, being um a commodity. Um because she’d have to be married off to someone else, with wealth and power.”

In Beth’s description, the children have more than an ornamental feel. She imagines the girl in the image center to be regarded as a valuable item in a marriage transaction, owned by her parents and sold “*off to someone else*”. The painting in Beth’s description is suggestive of an advertisement displaying the attributes of the child, her background and upbringing. Furthermore, Beth here is imagining motivations for the image composition that have future implications. She sees a time prior to the depicted moment and considers the character’s future beyond it - a time yet to occur for the character, although also in Beth’s own past.

The intermingling’s of seen, sensed, and understood, described by the participants, provide texture and richness to the engagements, fleshing out what is more directly depicted or visually tangible. The image, as engaged with by the viewer, contains aspects that may be intuited and sensed, but not explicitly perceived. In interacting with the image, features and properties assumed to circumscribe our everyday environment become altered. Rather than employing the magic realism of written fiction, where the fantastic or mythical are interwoven with everyday life, here viewers’ experiences suggest what we might call a flexible naturalism. Within the special thickness of their interpretations, layering and interweaving of time, place, and different contextual worlds occurs. During such experiences the natural attitude is unchallenged, nothing is felt to be strange, but its laws, nevertheless, are altered. Oliver, without describing any notions of time travel, felt a direct communication with a character who remained in the past as securely as did he in the present. Gwen described a man turning to look back at a room from a doorway at the rear of the image. The image remained flat, she did not imagine it explicitly changing dimensions, and yet the figure was able to look back through space.

When considering notions of family depicted in the painting, the participants demonstrated complex and imaginative inferences of time, place, and space. The qualities or rules

which we generally assume govern the world were experienced as seemingly flexible. However, as demonstrated in the theme to be explored next, this was not an imaginative free-for-all, simultaneously the reigns of situatedness were felt as active and present.

Juxtapositions and Tensions

Interpretations of the family dynamic implicated multiple interwoven perspectives. This was echoed in the interpretative activities that were focused on other aspects of the painting. The viewers' interpretative activity elicited a broader appreciation of 'juxtapositions and tensions', and a recognition and negotiation of layering's and contrasts. For example, the viewers' dedicated considerable interpretative focus to the portrayal of the two central female characters. These women are commonly understood to be Margaret Theresa the Infanta of Spain and Maria Bárbola, a member of the court entourage. Margaret Theresa is the blonde figure in the white dress and Maria, brunette, stands second from the right in green.

“By putting these in direct juxtaposition he's asking us 'which do you prefer?' And why? And what does that say about you?”

Jay described the pairing of Margaret Theresa and Maria as a challenge directed from the artist toward the viewer. Notably, he apparently felt this query to be active, current, and present. In Jay's interpretation, the viewer is being encouraged to think about which of two figures they find more appealing and what that might mean. There appears to be something rhetorical about the demand; this is not a survey conducted to measure preference for blondes versus brunettes. Rather for Jay, Velázquez was making a point about the power of appearance to prejudice judgement; he was using painting to communicate and to speak through.

We get the sense from this extract that, although separated by place, by time, (and ultimately by mortality as Velázquez is dead), Jay still experienced the intentions of the artist as an active provocation. Velázquez was felt to extend a critical eye, beyond his own historical and

cultural context and out to the present-day viewer “*he’s asking us*”. The juxtaposition of the two women and its relevance to modern viewers also figured in Beth’s response:

“For a modern viewer to juxtapose this quote perfect quote which is how she’s being portrayed, um next to an imperfect in their view person, is um is quite er... horrible really. Um if you see it in a broader context they’re both being commodified, she’s the possession of this girl’s parents, the woman with dwarfism erm almost just as much as the little girl herself because she’s going to have to be married off to some character. She’s got no more free will perhaps even than this woman um so when you see it like that it’s really it’s a picture of chains, of a very pretty prison.”

Beth perceived a juxtaposition of stereotypical perfection and imperfection which she understandably found upsetting. The contrast was apparently no less striking despite its historical situatedness, its implications very present and “*horrible*”. Following her initial response, Beth considered a second account of the two figures from a “*broader context*”. Maria was still understood as owned by the family and in servitude, but Margaret Theresa was determined to be in a similarly unfavorable position. Instead of the face of perfection, she came to represent a commodity, chattel in a marriage cum business agreement. Both women were understood to be the family’s material assets in what Beth called “*a picture of chains, of a very pretty prison*”.

Beth contrasted what she felt was her position as a modern viewer, to other perspectives and thus developed alternative interpretations of the scene. The juxtaposition, which at first felt quite cruel and uncaring, could also be viewed as a careful and deliberate protestation against the same devaluation Beth initially found so unpleasant. Despite her ability to explore alternatives, Beth’s emotional response seemed persistent and sticky. Her distress did not simply switch off as different interpretations were tested, rather her feelings seemingly overran contextual or perspectival boundaries.

Like Beth, Linda described the depiction of Margaret Theresa and Maria (to whom she refers predominantly in the extract) as a deliberate and powerful juxtaposition:

“How is disability approached and treated and everything else. You do begin to think about that and you’re thinking you look at this figure and she seems questioning and self-possessed as I say but, what in a strange way you think was this a good position to be in as part of the retinue of the royal Spanish family who may have had her as part of their status or whatever, but it actually I don’t think this painting is diminished whoever this person might be and I think that’s a real triumph of this painting. [...] I think they are both in their own ways, those two faces are both very beautiful faces and they are positioned so they are juxtaposed and I think that’s deliberate.”

Linda felt that the image portrayed the monarchy and members of their court in historic Spain. She interpreted a beauty of character in the depiction of Maria, whom she understood to have been the ‘court dwarf’, and felt that this particular beauty was emphasized through her juxtaposition with the Infanta.

Linda’s understanding of the historicity depicted, informed her interpretation. She described Maria’s expression of self-possession in light of her role in the Spanish Court. Linda’s evaluation was seemingly shaped by a tension between the historical context of the image as she understood it, and her own values. She described the strangeness of interpreting such a position as not wholly negative for Maria. Her own morality challenged by the subjugation of a self-possessed, independent woman, while she also understood that in the time and context depicted, this was a better situation than many had to endure. Though the interpretation was uncomfortable and “*strange*” for Linda, the painting transcended such boundaries, depicting a morality and humanity which had a timeless relevance - “*actually I don’t think this painting is diminished whoever this person might be*”. Linda, like Beth, suggested an awareness of multiple contexts associated with what she saw depicted. And like Beth her interpretation involved both distinguishing those contexts and drawing them together. Understandings were historically

situated, but this history and its inhabitants (depicted and viewing) were experienced as mutually informative. What each saw in the painting seemingly involved understandings based on multiple interlaced perspectives.

The dyad of the two figures was not the only juxtaposition in the image which was interpreted as meaningful. Also suggested were slightly more abstract interpretations of prototypicality, deviance and transgression. Many of the viewers remarked upon a perceived depicting, and then undermining or contravening, of formal structures or stereotypes. Again, the interpretative work involved a consideration of past and present norms and values and how these perspectives might relate. As a result, the image could be seen as both transgressive and progressive. Floyd, for example, explained:

“I would have thought initially that that guy [in the doorway] like I said commissioned it and it, you know, would make sense it’s kind of a little bit of er I guess a left-field play, to also include an artist supposedly painting something else in the painting. That would I guess for the time have been er er a pretty wild pretty adventurous pretty inventive.”

Floyd acknowledged the historical context of the image. His interpretative activity involved an interesting layering as he imagined a potentially fictional character within the image, at a time *before* the image was created. For Floyd, the motivations and actions of this person were exciting and quite radical. There was a sense of exhilaration associated with the compositional decisions made. Floyd imagined these to be unorthodox and “*inventive*”; rules, as they had existed, were broken and this rule-breaking was seen as progressive. These sentiments (concerning the same figure) were echoed by Sasha:

“The figure right in the door in the background he’s got that kind of the Spanish explorer types, you know you see paintings of Spanish conquistador types with their, with that kind of costume”

Sasha interpreted a character who discovered new worlds or travelled into uncharted territory, the “*conquistador types*”. Although more clearly located within the world of the image, this resonated with the broader “*pretty wild pretty adventurous pretty inventive*” sentiment noted by Floyd. Nora also ascribed a sense of exploration to this character. Like Sasha, the adventurousness expressed itself as an interpretation of the character’s vocation and personal narrative within the image:

“The people who are interesting and who are not just kind of erm - the royal family, are just to be be looked at aren’t they or are symbols, are the people who’ve got lives like the painter, this guy whose obviously going off on a voyage, perhaps he’s been sent off on a mission by the royal family or something, he’s obviously very important figure and he’s got a very, he’s going out the door so he’s not stuck in this quite claustrophobic sort of courtly kind of situation.”

Nora described the character as a voyager. He represented freedom, difference, and exploration, and was escaping the status quo and the confines of being “*stuck*” in time and custom. Nora juxtaposed different types of figures in the image. The Royal family were uninteresting in contrast with “*the people who’ve got lives*”. Some characters were felt to be static, confined to a point in time and “*claustrophobic*”, whereas others had more active narratives and potential futures (“*going out the door*”).

In their interpretative work, the viewers all recognized, and seemed to feel influenced by, their understandings of different contexts (such as the static versus dynamic temporalities implicated by Nora,) and a push and pull between them. There was a notion of being made aware of rules and stereotypes and then seeing them broken, so as to challenge the ideas which constructed or framed them. For Jay, this tension was quite explicit and difficult as he explored notions of both deviance and progression in response to the image:

“Cos we’re used to things like people who are influenced afterwards like Goya and Picasso who did put deliberate ugly figures in their paintings in order to express some kind of grotesqueness and consequently the dwarf does express a feeling of grotesqueness which is being kind of reflected on the monarchy itself. But of course even if we just leave that aside and I feel kind of horrible expressing that.”

Jay considered the inclusion of the figure he understood to be the court dwarf. He described an artistic tradition of grotesquery presented to unsettle and disturb. This ‘deviance’ from the norm, he explained, had gained a form of normalcy (“we’re used to”) following subsequent adoption by later artists. Velázquez was progressive for his time in Jay’s evaluation. He created a radical commentary on the monarchy, indicating *their* grotesqueness in a challenge to the then status quo. He paved the way for subsequent painters and for the acceptance of those once thought of as grotesques, in paintings.

Despite the many progressive elements Jay attributed to the painting, and the seemingly sensitive, balanced way he interpreted the depiction, he indicated feeling deviant and “*kind of horrible*” at his response. For Jay, even an awareness of a historical perspective that he did not share¹, generated discomfort and a sense of moral compromise. Interestingly, there did not seem to be a safe separation between past understandings and the modern viewer. Historical contexts could be identified, but this did not mean one could detach oneself from the meanings associated with them. In recognizing such perspectives, viewers could become linked to transgressions of the past.

Throughout the theme *Meaning-Making: Interpretative Content*, considerations of how the painting might be understood, and to when and where that understanding might be tethered, pervaded the viewers’ interpretative activities. Notions of families at different points in time,

¹ The history of how people with dwarfism have been represented in art is explored by Professor Tom Shakespeare, the sociologist who himself has achondroplasia, see for example <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/dwarfs-in-art-a-new-perspective/>

characters realized in multiple dynamic imaginings, and interpretations of what was meant as situated in different historical contexts, all informed the viewing experience.

Viewers perceived meaningful communications (for example of emotion, social circumstance, or ongoing narrative), through the image and the characters they saw. Though these characters were understood to exist at a prior point in history, they still had an impactful ‘presence’, connecting with and effecting the viewers in the moment, without any perception of their travelling back in time. Some characters were perceived as static representations confined to the image at a point in history and recorded through the medium of paint. Other characters moved through the image, and were about to leave and make the history that the viewer looked back upon. Others again, were imagined to have been present before the painting existed, and to have then contributed to its creation.

We return to the notion of *through*: painting as a tool through which to communicate demonstrate and record, and also as a channel or passage emphasizing the fluid connections between image and viewer, between diverse social and historical contexts, and through times and places.

Discussion

The viewers’ interpretative work was rich with the influence of a broadly sensed historicity. In the subtheme *Families and Social Structures*, viewers untangled personal, social, and historical narratives of the family they each uniquely, yet similarly, saw depicted. Explorations of family invoked multiple perceived contextual influences such as the culture of the time, changing social or political norms, or the intent to create a historical record. Similarly, in the subtheme *Juxtapositions and Tensions*, viewers negotiated contrasts between contexts and perspectives, between viewing through historic and modern lenses, and between the moralities associated with each, provoking feelings of discomfort, appreciation, conflict, and exhilaration.

Cumulatively, viewers saw “*people from a certain point in history*” (William) in an image that made “*reference to historic relations*” (Oliver) viewed from a “*modern perspective*” (Jay). This awareness is in accord with the concerns raised by Bulot and Reber (2013), who decried a general academic neglect of viewers’ sensitivity to historical and contextual natures of artworks. Discussion of artworks as socially, culturally, or historically embedded, often implies an object set in a bed of influences. Context is typically approached as fixed and extraneous information, which may be supplied or withheld - for instance details of the artist (e.g., Hernando & Campo, 2017) or image title (e.g., Bubic et al., 2017). The historically embedded nature of an artwork is then something of which viewers may have varying degrees of awareness, and can thus be influenced by learning (e.g. Park et al., 2015).

The embedded nature of the artwork as described here was experienced as continually re-constituting. Context, as interpreted by these viewers, was seemingly created and molded through the activity of their interpretative engagement. Historicity was retro-actively constructed and experienced as part of a lived, malleable continuum, ever in a state of being created by the viewer and image combined. In this sense, the past was conceived as neither fixed and immutable, nor separable from the present.

Historically, psychological investigations of art-viewing fell under the purview of *psychophysics*, a term which espouses the axioms of the material world. This emphasis has persisted and research continues to ask how we perceive space (Kapoula et al., 2011), motion (Cattaneo et al., 2017) or indeterminant objects (Fairhall & Ishai, 2008) in paintings. Such work usually considers the temporal and spatial suggestiveness of paintings as structurally determined via image features, which viewers then observe and process.

The interpretative activity in the accounts reported here suggested a more dynamic sensing of time and place, seemingly generated through a domain shared by image and viewer. The special thickness found in the viewers' interpretations emphasized what was co-constituted, rather than what could be distinctly attributed to image or viewer characteristics. Gwen

interpreted a physical positioning in the image, a father figure “*looking wistfully back*” across the room at his daughters, and also through time into previous familial life. Similarly, Oliver described a figure “*looking at me possibly saying ‘it could have been me’*”, his understanding of her narrative in a previous time, and his own position in the present, undisturbed by the apparent immediacy and connectedness between himself and her gaze. Seemingly, context, temporality and space were lived in a creative pliable fashion, shaped through the activity of meaning-making rather than as response to natural stimuli.

Evaluations

Smith (2011) presents criteria for the evaluation of IPA such as the encouragement to provide clear focus and sufficient space for thematic elaboration “rather than a broad reconnaissance” (p. 24). Clear focus is reflected in the presentation of a single theme here. This focus also facilitated the required emphasis on interpretation rather than just description, as meanings within each extract could be explored in depth. Smith (2011) suggests indications of rigor include the provision of extracts from a sufficient number of participants per theme (depending on sample size), and indication of thematic prevalence across participants. This has also been followed.

Extending the Smith (2011) criteria, Nizza et al., (2021) identify four indicators of high quality in IPA, ***emboldened*** in the following appraisal:

Construction of a compelling, unfolding a narrative of progressive engagement with the image is presented. The findings give an account of the meanings participants’ derived through their viewing, as they were offered, developed, and revised. We follow the increasing richness of these interpretations, and the unfolding of associated interpretative activity.

Exploration not only of what the participants said they saw in the image, but also how they saw (the layers of communication extrapolated by William), and what this activity was like (the pain felt by Beth in response to perceptions of bondage and her attempts to resolve this

response), allowed the *development of a vigorous experiential and/or existential account*. This account is demonstrably based on a *close analytic reading of participants' words* as evidenced via the fine-grained consideration of the extracts provided and concern with the significances ascribed by participants to aspects of their viewing. *Attention to convergences and divergences* has been paid both across the theme itself (the diversity of responses and reactions converging on notions of family) and also within individual accounts (the divergence of Jay's admiration and unease converging in the same interpretation).

Just as much of the discussion concerns historicity, the painting responded to has its own. Las Meninas is a famous image painted by a famous artist. The implications of this on the findings, are difficult to unpack. The participants were all part of a culture in which interpretations of the painting, and/or knowledge of the artist, may have been encountered in different contexts. This was explored by the participants themselves (for example by Jay and Beth with quite different implications). However, not all the participants were familiar with the painting or aware of its provenance, and their existing knowledge varied in scope and 'accuracy'. They did not all see a painting by Velázquez depicting events in the Spanish Court (indeed several saw a Dutch artwork). It is arguably not possible to determine whether the Las Meninas seen by one individual was the same as the Las Meninas seen by another, or indeed the same as seen by the same person on different occasions.

Ultimately, each viewing was as much a product of the participant's individuality, as of the colors and shapes before them. The theme which was developed, explores differences and commonalities in the sense-making activities that were bound up in what participants felt they saw. That being said, it is reasonable to intuit that the findings may have been different had a different painting been chosen. This study is not intended to be the complete or last word on the experience. It is hoped that explorations involving other viewers, and other images, will be prompted and thus contribute to an expanding knowledge of what it is like to look at a painting.

Conclusion

Inductive phenomenological work provides us with a window into ways of thinking and asking questions about art-viewing which may have been overlooked by approaches more synonymous with the natural sciences. The need for multiple perspectives toward the study of art-viewing has been argued for by the likes of Wagemans (2011, p. 651), who describes such interdisciplinary study as a “trade-off between maximizing experimental control (using simple stimuli) and maximizing ecological validity (using real artworks)”. The findings reported here present an encouragement for the addition, to this balancing act, of a human validity. Further experiential work has the potential to complement the existing body of art-viewing research by contributing a different, additional type of empirical knowledge to it. To this end, IPA represents a powerful means to augment the tools of experimentation by allowing us to get a measure of the unmeasurable: “*So it’s this mixture of the formal rules and the kind of breaking of those rules*” (Sasha).

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