

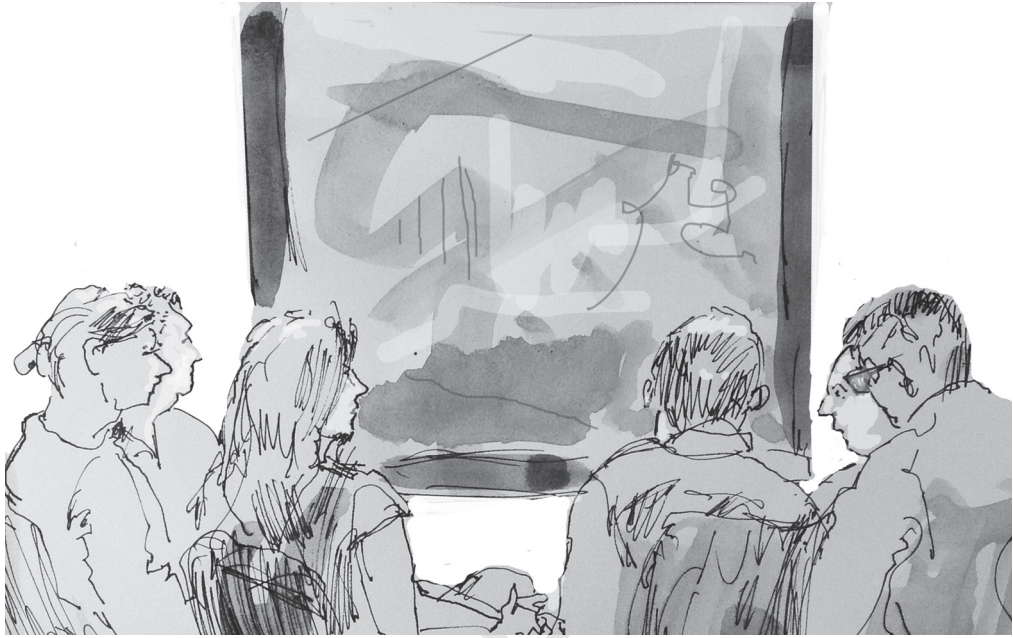


The Paintings



SAMPLE

Introduction



In the following chapters I have tried to explore within the limitations of a book some of the visual, aesthetic, creative and intellectual hallmarks of a great masterpiece.

Ideally, we would be a small group in front of the work of art itself, sitting in a semicircle so that each member has an unrestricted full view of the work of art, as well as of the faces and reactions of the others as we debate and question our different observations and interpretations.

The origin of this book was a light-hearted lecture that I gave many years ago called 'Desert Island Pictures'. It was a straight theft of the radio programme *Desert Island Discs*, the longest continuously running radio programme in the history of broadcasting. The format is a half-hour chat with an interesting personality about what makes them tick, interspersed with brief excerpts of music from eight records of their choice. The programme presupposes that the guest will be stranded alone on a sandy sun-kissed desert island with an old-fashioned portable wind-up gramophone, the discs having a playing time of scarcely more than two minutes.

I thought it would be interesting to be stranded on a desert island with eight pictures of my choice. In that remote retreat there is no one to consult, no library, no internet and no access to information other than recollection and the cultural baggage that the castaway brings in his or her head. In other words, all the intellectual apparatus on which academic 'Art History' is utterly dependent, is non-existent. I would have no resources other than my own eyes, my faulty memory, my personal experience and imagination, and yet have all the time in the world. In other words, I would have to investigate qualities and possibilities that are beyond the scope and range of conventional academic Art History which too often becomes so obsessed with cultural theories, factual minutiae and obscure documentation that it forgets to look at the work of art itself and takes no pleasure in actual looking.

Clearly, I was never going to be on an actual desert island with my chosen pictures. Fortunately, happenstance presented an interesting alternative. During the Covid lockdown when no one knew how long our isolation would last, we might as well have been stranded on desert islands. I put my eight pictures in turn on my large computer screen and looked at each of them for days on end. I kept a diary to record day by day what I saw, what I thought, what I remembered and what I imagined. I resolutely resisted the temptation to look up anything on the internet or take down a book from my library shelves. It was a thrilling experience because each painting (albeit in reproduction) revealed itself to me as never before, and by simply letting myself experience and enjoy what I saw, I discovered remarkable things about each painting and myself. I hesitate to say it was a life-changing experience, although I believe it was. It certainly changed my way of seeing and the way I experience works of art.

I never had any hesitation in choosing these four pictures – the next four proved to be much more difficult. I present them in the order in which I chose them. For me, Velázquez' *Las Meninas* is the greatest painting in the world. Personally, the little Infanta Margarita reminds me of my two blond daughters and how they were at that age. The painting has also helped me come to terms with the misfortunes of my own family. I chose Fra Angelico's *The Cortona Altarpiece* because artistically it is everything

that the Velázquez is not, and because it links me directly with the place and occasion of my own discovery of happiness and love. Both pictures have deep moral, intellectual and spiritual content, so for my next painting I chose Canaletto's *Arrival of the French Ambassador in Venice* since it makes the point that great art need not aim for seriousness or profundity – entertainment may serve just as well. The final choice of the Jackson Pollock was because I wanted something that had been created in my lifetime, and because it reminds me that no life is beyond the hope of redemption, and that recuperation, consolation and salvation, is one of the principal reasons for artistic inspiration and creation.



Las Meninas (1656)
by Diego Velázquez
is in the Prado
Museum, Madrid

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After Velázquez,
ink wash on
watercolour paper



Velázquez
Las Meninas

