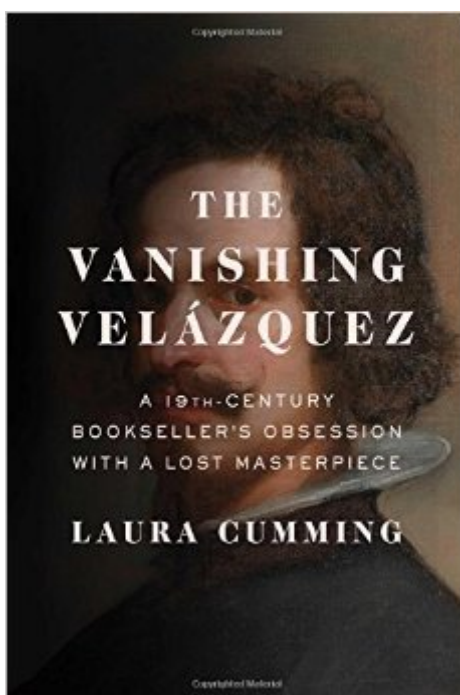


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The Vanishing Velázquez: A 19th Century Bookseller's Obsession With A Lost Masterpiece



Synopsis

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER From one of the world's most expert art critics, the incredible true story—part art history and part mystery—of a Velazquez portrait that went missing and the obsessed nineteenth-century bookseller determined to prove he had found it. When John Snare, a nineteenth-century provincial bookseller, traveled to a liquidation auction, he stumbled on a vivid portrait of King Charles I that defied any explanation. The Charles of the painting was young—too young to be king—and yet also too young to be painted by the Flemish painter to which the work was attributed. Snare had found something incredible—but what? His research brought him to Diego Velazquez, whose long-lost portrait of Prince Charles has eluded art experts for generations. Velazquez (1599–1660) was the official painter of the Madrid court, during the time the Spanish Empire teetered on the edge of collapse. When Prince Charles of England—a man wealthy enough to help turn Spain's fortunes—ventured to the court to propose a marriage with a Spanish princess, he allowed just a few hours to sit for his portrait. Snare believed only Velazquez could have met this challenge. But in making his theory public, Snare was ostracized, victim to aristocrats and critics who accused him of fraud, and forced to choose, like Velazquez himself, between art and family. A thrilling investigation into the complex meaning of authenticity and the unshakable determination that drives both artists and collectors of their work, *The Vanishing Velazquez* travels from extravagant Spanish courts in the 1700s to the gritty courtrooms and auction houses of nineteenth-century London and New York. But it is above all a tale of mystery and detection, of tragic mishaps and mistaken identities, of class, politics, snobbery, crime, and almost farcical accident. It is a magnificently crafted page-turner, a testimony to how and why great works of art can affect us to the point of obsession.

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Customer Reviews

Wanted to give a heads up for all readers NOT to buy this on Kindle. Much of the importance of the book lies in the author's descriptions of the art. It is important to be able to actually see the art, but Kindle only shows it in black and white. And it is desirable to flip back and forth, to read the author's description and then look at the plate. This is very complicated on Kindle. That being said, I pushed myself to read about 1/3 through and finally decided shouldn't be selling this on Kindle. I wrote to complain and they, within minutes, gave me a full refund of my Kindle price. I have now ordered the book version. Again, this has been hard to read on Kindle, but it seems to me the author skips around quite a lot. She'll describe a picture and then move on, and then return to the picture later. Maybe this all makes sense in a book version, but it seems to me the choice of organization is not the best. The descriptions are very interesting though, lots of quotable ideas, but again it was hard to compare what she was saying to the art itself in the Kindle. I should know better to never buy non-fiction on Kindle -- I love to underline as I read and it's just not the same on Kindle. Plus sometimes I like to go back and refer to something earlier that the author wrote -- again, very difficult to do on a Kindle. So this book has convinced me -- no more non-fiction on Kindle unless it's very lightweight stuff.

About 35 years ago, I noticed a painting in a window of a local art gallery/semi-curiosity shop in the Chicago suburb where I lived. It was a largish painting of a young girl in Spanish court garb, and looked for all the world like a painting by Diego Velazquez. The painting was priced at \$2000 - well-beyond my budget at the time - but I would visit the shop window almost daily for a few months, until it was sold. Could this painting be a Velazquez? For a mere \$2000? I never would know but I later found out that several other people had eyed the painting, thinking, "maybe..." Now, I know that I should have found the \$2000 from somewhere and bought the painting. Because, even if it wasn't a true Velazquez, it would have taken a large place in my heart. He and Albrecht Durer have long been my favorite painters, both because of their art, but also for the history they portrayed. British art historian Laura Cumming has written a book, "The Vanishing Velazquez: A 19th Century Bookseller's Obsession With a Lost Masterpiece", about John Snare, who purchased at an auction in 1845 a painting he thinks is a portrait of Prince Charles, painted by Diego Velazquez. Charles,

heir to the British crown, made a trip to Spain to - maybe - marry a Spanish princess. The trip, which occurred in 1623, was the only time Charles was known to be in Spain, and Diego Velazquez - aside from two trips to Italy - never left Spain. But John Snare thought the painting was a Velazquez, bought it, and spent the rest of his life in homage to the painting. He displayed his treasure in England and Scotland for years - suffering through law suits - before leaving his family in Reading, and moving, with the painting, to New York City. He continued to show the painting, earning money that kept him in a precarious financial state til his death. He never returned to England and only once was reunited with a son, who was born after he and the painting absconded to the United States. John Snare truly lived his life in thrall of a painting. Laura Cumming writes about the hunt for both the provenance of Snare's painting, as well as the hunt for the painting itself. It seems to have disappeared into the mists of time and may have been destroyed physically or lost in the back rooms of a museum or in the attic of a country house. She takes the reader on a journey to both the courts of Kings James I and Charles I, as well as that of Spain's Philip IV. It was in this court where the genius of Diego Velazquez was seen in all it's glory; his paintings of court members and commoners alike give the Hapsburg Philip IV its place in history. Cumming describes both Velazquez's subjects and painting style and how that style influenced painters from then on. Laura Cumming's book is part mystery, part character-study, and part a history of the art and of the times the art was painted. My only complaint - and I'm not sure if its important - is that the display of the art plates in the Kindle version of the book is not great. I guess that most ebooks are lacking in adequate pictorial display. But Cumming's book is marvelous reading for anyone interested in history, art, and how art keeps its place in history.

Diego Velazquez is rightfully accounted one of the greatest of painters, and also as one of the least understood. He is remembered for a series of magnificent portraits, usually of seventeenth century Spanish royalty and nobility but also including many perceptive studies of servants, court dwarfs, and other menials. With the slightest touch of his brush he could depict his sitters' inner characters so well that some, including the King of Spain, often refused to pose for him lest he reveal too much. In the nineteenth century John Snare was a busy stationer and bookseller in Reading, England, prosperous enough that he could indulge a love for collecting old paintings. At one fateful auction Snare was struck by the grimy portrait of a young man, purchased it for a few pounds, then spent the rest of his life obsessed with it. That portrait is the link between Velazquez and Snare. Snare became convinced that it was a long lost portrait of the future King Charles I of England, known to have been painted by Velazquez in 1623 during the Prince's unsuccessful attempt to marry a

Spanish Infanta, and spent the rest of his life attempting to convince the rest of the world of the rightness of his belief. This led to financial ruin, separation from his family, a lengthy lawsuit from a Scottish peer who believed he was the rightful owner of the painting, and eventual obscurity and an unknown grave in New York City. Laura Cumming's fascinating chronicle traces Snare's story and tells it in parallel with that of Velazquez. The daughter of a painter and an art critic herself, Cumming does an excellent job of describing and analyzing Velazquez's paintings for us, so that we actually feel we are standing in front of Las Meninas in the Prado, for example. She does just as good a job of detection in her reconstruction of Snare's life, though the paper trail was frustratingly faint and she is forced to disappoint us in the end by revealing that no trace of Snare's painting can be found today. I finished this book knowing a great deal more about, and with an infinitely greater appreciation of, the work of Diego Velazquez. I also finished it with great sympathy for John Snare and the hope that someday, in some bank vault or dark corner, his painting will be rediscovered and finally verified as a Velazquez.

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