

SPAIN



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Peasants at the Table (El Almuerzo) | c. 1620 | Oil on canvas, 96 x 112 cm | Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

VELÁZQUEZ ■ At an age when artists of today are only just beginning their studies at college, Velázquez was already painting his genre scenes: there are several studies of musicians and peasants eating. Later, around 1625, he began to paint scenes from the Gospels in which he found it possible to introduce everyday objects; for instance, in his picture of Christ in the house of Martha; he filled the foreground with a still-life of fish and eggs, relegating the figure of Christ to the background.

In his Breakfast the human figures are scarcely more important than the still-life. It is of course true that the three figures reveal a thorough knowledge of anatomy, while the details are well chosen to indicate character and personal relationships. Superb craftsmanship is shown in the painting of the full, parted lips of the younger man, the eyes of the old man listening to the story and his slight movement towards the glass and the expression on the face of the woman pouring out the wine, concentrating lest a single drop be spilled. Nevertheless it is possible to argue that the most striking part of the composition is the still-life arranged on the white tablecloth. As a description of the bread, fish, lemon, carrot and copper jar seen here there could scarcely be a more inappropriate phrase than nature morte (dead nature), the term used for a still-life in so many languages. Still though these objects are, they have a genuine pictorial quality, a vigour which is akin to life itself.

The Peasants at Table is one of Velázquez's finest early pieces of the type known in Spain as a "bodegón", a combination of conversation piece and still-life. There is another version of Peasant at Table in the Hermitage in St. Petersburg ■

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