



**Right:** Johannes Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter*, a circa 1663 oil-on-canvas work, is on loan to the Meadows Museum from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam.

**Far right:** Spanish artist Salvador Dalí's 1938 oil painting *The Image Disappears*, which was painted in response to Vermeer, hangs alongside the Dutch artist's masterpiece in the Meadows Museum's "Dalí/Vermeer: A Dialogue." The work was loaned by the Fundació Gala-Salvador Dalí.

Guy Rogers III

## VISUAL ARTS

# DALÍ, VERMEER AND

Three exhibitions show wide range of Meadows Museum at SMU

**A** lone in a room, bathed in morning light, in front of a string of pearls on a table, a woman reads a letter, her face impossible to interpret. What, exactly, is she reading? Who wrote it? And what is going through her mind?

This tantalizing scene, depicted in Vermeer's *Woman in Blue Reading a Letter* (circa 1663), introduces a theme — the power of women reading — variations of which run throughout the three special exhibitions now on view at the Meadows Museum on the Southern Methodist University campus.

In the first room, Vermeer's painting hangs across from Salvador Dalí's *The Image Disappears* (1938), which was painted in response to Vermeer. Both have been loaned by European collections for this occasion.

Seen together, the two paintings that make up "Dalí/Vermeer: A Dialogue" offer a fascinating case study of one of the building blocks of art history: how a young artist, determined to prove himself against the past masters, responds to their intimidating greatness with both admiration and a challenge. While the *Woman in Blue* exhibits the cool, clear perfection for which Vermeer is renowned, Dalí's response is full of tension and ambiguity.

Suffused with a hot orange light and built up from jittery, agitated brushstrokes, Dalí's feverish composition is the polar opposite of Vermeer's clarity. Instead of a letter, Dalí's woman looks to be holding a sharp antelope horn, and she stands in front of a bed with what looks like a body under rumpled covers. Dalí has practically turned Ver-



**BENJAMIN LIMA**

artslife@dallasnews.com

meer's original into a scene from a film noir, aggressively reorienting the whole mood of his inspiration.

Like other Surrealists, Dalí believed in the power of Freudian unconscious drives and motivations, so it is fitting that he would display an aggressive, Oedipal rivalry toward his senior, attempting to (metaphorically) dethrone and kill the Dutch master. In any case, the dramatic contrast between two such different paintings on the same basic competition is quite memorable.

From a distance and a different angle, Dalí's painting also becomes one of his famous "double-image" optical illusions, as the composition appears to re-form into the silhouette of a bearded man — not Vermeer, but Diego Velázquez, another of the Old Masters who lived rent-free in Dalí's head. And just one gallery over from the Dalí show is another loan exhibition, this one featuring Velázquez, which gives a good sense of why he loomed so large for later painters.

## Velázquez's portraits

The second special exhibition — and the second of the Meadows' "Masterpiece in Residence" shows, after the arrival of Juan Sánchez Cotán's *Quince, Cabbage, Melon, and Cucumber* in the spring — brings Velázquez's 1644 portrait of King Philip IV from the Frick Collection in New York to be shown alongside the Meadows' own three works by the painter, which include another portrait of Philip and one of Queen Mariana. A handsomely illustrated 48-page catalog (\$15) gives further insight into the work.



Michael Bodycomb

**Diego Velázquez's** 1644 portrait of King Philip IV of Spain is on loan to the Meadows Museum from the Frick Collection in New York. It's being shown alongside the Meadows' own three works by the painter, which include another portrait of Philip and one of Queen Mariana.

With a masterfully lifelike rendering of the king as a military commander, the image of authority appealed to steel magnate Henry Clay Frick, who paid almost half a million dollars in 1911 to make it a centerpiece of his blue-chip collection. The current exhibition shows how, inspired by Titian and in contrast to the Meadows' own simpler and earlier portrait of the king, Velázquez in the Frick painting achieved unparalleled heights of virtuosity in his fine, delicate, detailed brushwork, especially visible in the king's clothing.

Painted with a similarly light touch is the only





Salvador Dalí, Artists Rights Society/Guy Rogers III

# D MORE



Courtesy of Bridwell Library Special Collections, SMU

This engraving from Juan de Rojas y Ausa, which dates to the 1600s, is included in the Meadows Museum's "Picturing Holy Women in the Spanish Empire, 1620-1800."

nonroyal subject among Velázquez's four portraits, an unidentified woman who blissfully, sensually traces her finger along a clay tablet. The tablet suggests that she might be a sibyl, one of the ancient Roman prophetesses who were believed to have foretold the coming of Christ by consulting their holy books.

## Holy women on the page

Women reading and writing are also at the core of "Picturing Holy Women in the Spanish Empire, 1620-1800," a show of works on paper, heavily em-

phasizing printed books and their illustrations. The works are drawn from the collections of the Meadows Museum, and from those of the Bridwell and DeGolyer libraries nearby on the SMU campus.

While U.S. readers would be more familiar with the trajectory of the English-speaking print culture that runs from Shakespeare's folios through the pamphlets of the American Revolution, this exhibition is an enlightening glimpse into its contemporaneous Spanish-speaking counterpart, which stretched across the Atlantic to encompass Spanish Texas and was significantly powered by female literary and intellectual talent.

We are introduced to pioneering figures such as María Ignacia de Azlor y Echeverz, who in 1752 in Mexico City founded one of the first girls' schools in Spanish America, and the 17th-century protofeminist Mexican nun, philosopher, playwright, composer and poet Juana Inés de la Cruz, with her library of over 4,000 books, who was fluent in Latin and Nahuatl and wrote vigorously against official sexism.

On display in the galleries, and appearing throughout the literature of the period, are Catholic heroines both modern (Saints Teresa of Ávila and Rose of Lima) and ancient (Mary Magdalene and the Virgin Mary), who exemplified ideal womanhood in books written, read and collected by such women, despite efforts by the church and state to constrain their freedoms.

For example, one fascinating engraving shows Saint Teresa's speech bubbles extending across the page into the form of a castle, creating a concrete visual emblem of Teresa's popular spiritual book, *The Interior Castle*.

Intelligently curated with carefully chosen pieces, these three exhibitions give a wonderful sense of the enormous range that is encompassed within the Meadows' deceptively simple-sounding mission of presenting Spanish art.

*Benjamin Lima is a Dallas-based art historian and the editor of Athenaeum Review, the University of Texas at Dallas journal of arts and ideas.*

## Details

"Dalí/Vermeer: A Dialogue," "Masterpiece in Residence: Velázquez's King Philip IV of Spain from The Frick Collection" and "Picturing Holy Women in the Spanish Empire, 1620-1800" continue through Jan. 15 at the Meadows Museum, 5900 Bishop Blvd. Open Tuesday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday from 10 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. \$12 for adults; \$10 for seniors 65 or older; \$4 for non-SMU students; and free for members, youths age 18 and younger, and SMU faculty, staff and students. Free Thursdays after 5 p.m. 214-768-2516, meadowsmuseumdallas.org.