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Essay 5

Power and Authority of Baroque

Power and authority are an important part of art in the Baroque time period. This is heavily evident in Hyacinthe Rigaud's Louis XIV(1700 CE) from the French Baroque, the Italian Baroque Judith Slaying Holofernes by Artemisia Gentileschi (1614-1629 CE), and Diego Velazquez's Las Meninas (1650 CE) from the Spanish Baroque time period.

King Louis the XIV knew the power that art possessed as propaganda, and the value of a visual image that it held to cultivate a public persona. He had several extravagant commissions that included symbols and monuments to show his absolute power. His portrait painted by Hyacinthe Rigaud conveys the image of an absolute monarch that is under control. The king's mere posture gives off the vibe of his haughtiness as he places his left hand on his hip and holds a golden scepter with his right hand. He is confident of his importance and the authority that he has over his people. Louis even flaunts his legs for admiration as they are lucidly exposed.

Louis was a man of short stature as he stood at a height of five feet and four inches tall. The artist placed King Louis in a manner where his height would be neglected as the focal attention. The canvas itself is a 9x6, and king takes up nearly the entire painting space. The artist put Louis on a platform that elevates him above everyone else to further enhance his height. King Louis gazes down at the viewers to overwhelm them with not only the massive size of the painting, but also his unnerving, direct gaze.

The king is dressed in elaborate Baroque clothing. A heavy blue, velvet robe is thrown over his shoulder and cascades down his body. The contrasting red curtain behind the king appears to envelope him with its vibrant color. Part of a sword is shown since it hides behind his robe. It is noticeably placed as a military weapon and a phallic symbol. To the side, there is a crown as a reminder of Louis's importance. He is not only a rich man who owns expensive, extravagant things, but a king with absolute power.

Artemisia Gentileschi favored a specific theme that involved a heroic female. In her *Judith Slaying Holofernes*, she uses this theme to depict a woman, Judith, beheading a general, and later beheading him. Women overpowering men broke traditional art rules, and the Baroque period was common for breaking away from traditional art. Gentileschi clearly showed how powerful women can be in this painting. Women are not weak and fragile; they can be as strong as men are. Beheading this general is far from being lady-like as women strength is highly stressed upon.

Gentileschi highlights great drama through the usage of tenebrism that Caravaggio favored. A bright light illuminates the horrific scene, and the background is nonexistent as it is shrouded in darkness. The light highlights Judith's head to show the struggle that it is taking for her to complete her task as the maid holds the general down. It is evident that the strong light is focused on the scene to add to the drama of the moment of Judith triumphing over the man. Gentileschi was previously abused by a male patron and started putting her face into the faces of the women in her painting who were conquering over men as Judith is doing.

Judith Slaying Holofernes is a gruesome scene filled with struggle and blood. Gentileschi did not make this a clean scene as blood trickles and squirts everywhere. These two women aren't afraid to get their hands dirty as Judith tries to finish her deed. The general tries to fend his

killers off as he attempts to push the maid away with his hand. Judith had planned for this moment to happen as the maid is there to help her. Combined, Judith and the maid has strong power and authority over the general that is being conquered by them and moments away from dying within their grasp.

Velazquez's *Las Meninas* is a portrait of him in his studio with King Philip's family and servants. There is a cluster of people who surround the young princess. Her two maids-in-waiting are busying themselves with her, and her favorite dwarf is present near her. It feels as if the princess holds the authority and power in the room. At first glance, it appears as if Velazquez is painting the princess because of the close proximity and cluster of people who surrounds her. She appears to be the center of the attention of the room.

In *Las Meninas*, nearly everyone in the portrait is looking out to meet the onlooker's gaze. Velazquez, the maid, the dwarf, and even the princess herself are meeting viewer's gaze directly. The low horizon line nearly makes it seem as if the viewer is in the portrait itself, living in this moment that has been captured to be a standstill indefinitely. This gives viewers the feeling that they are the one who hold the authority of the people since they all seem to be waiting for a command from the person who stands where viewers are standing at.

Looking at the image more closely, there is a mirror at the back of the room that brightly reflects King Philip IV and his wife Queen Mariana. The king and queen are actually standing in the same place where the viewers are positioned. The onlookers are the one who are in the position of King Philip and his wife as majority of the people in the portrait are staring at them. By doing this, Velazquez made viewers have the same power of importance as the king and his wife when they are in the room since they are able to hold everyone's gaze.

The Baroque period utilized power in their portraits in order to show the dominant reign King Louis had over his subjects, women triumphing over men as Judith Slaying Holofernes exemplifies, and giving authority of a king and queen to onlookers of the painting as in the Las Meninas. King Louis's portrait emanated power from the mere size of the painting along with his wealth. Gentileschi exemplified that the Baroque time period was different from traditional art as she portrayed a female overcoming a man which had never before been depicted. Las Meninas showed the potential authority that someone can hold as Velazquez allowed viewers to have the title of being king or queen.