

# Saxl's approach to Spanish art: Velázquez and El Greco\*

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The bibliography of his writings does not identify Fritz Saxl (1890–1948) as a historian of Spanish art. Only the titles of two short texts allude to his preoccupation with El Greco and Diego Velázquez.<sup>1</sup> One is a review of August L. Mayer's 'El Greco', that appeared in *Kritische Berichte*, 1927; the other is a lecture on 'Velasquez and Philip IV', given in 1942 at the Courtauld Institute, and published in the volume of *Lectures* in 1957.<sup>2</sup> The research on Aby Warburg's ingenious iconographic interpretation of the *Hilanderas* by Velázquez as an 'Allegory of Weaving' in 1927, more than two decades before the analysis of Diego Ángulo Iñiguez, reveals that Saxl had played an important role in the process.<sup>3</sup> From March to April 1927 Saxl was researching in Spain and his work on Velázquez and the painters of the *Siglo de Oro* during that trip was an essential prerequisite for Warburg's interpretation, as can be shown from the correspondence between the two men in spring 1927.<sup>4</sup> Apart from these letters, it has also been possible to locate in the Warburg Institute Archive a whole file of, until now unaccounted for, 'Spanish notes' by Saxl in which Velázquez and El Greco play an important role, which indicates that he intended to do more work on Spanish projects.<sup>5</sup> Further research revealed in addition photographic material of Saxl's studies on El Greco, ten bound sheets of brown cardboard with numerous photos of paintings, wall paintings and engravings on

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<sup>1</sup> See the contributions of Gertrud Bing, 'Fritz Saxl (1890–1948)', in Donald James Gordon, ed., *Fritz Saxl, 1890–1948. A Volume of Memorial Essays from his Friends in England*, London, Edinburgh: Nelson, 1957, 1–46; Dorothea McEwan, 'Ausreiten der Ecken'. *Die Aby Warburg–Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1910–1915*, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz, 1998; Dorothea McEwan, 'Wanderstraßen der Kultur'. *Die Aby Warburg–Fritz Saxl Korrespondenz 1920–1929*, München, Hamburg: Dölling und Galitz 2004; a bibliography of Saxl's writings Fritz Saxl: *Lectures*, 2 vols, London: Warburg Institute, 1957, vol. 1, 359–365.

<sup>2</sup> Fritz Saxl, 'Rezension von August L. Mayer, Dominico Theotocopuli El Greco, München 1926'.: *Kritische Berichte zur Kunstgeschichtlichen Literatur*, 1, 1927/28, 86–96 and Fritz Saxl, 'Velasquez and Philip IV', in Saxl, *Lectures*, 311–324

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed reconstruction of the interpretation see Karin Hellwig, 'Interpretaciones iconográficas de las Hilanderas hasta Aby Warburg y Angulo Iñiguez', *Boletín del Museo del Prado*, 22:40, 2004, 38–55.

<sup>4</sup> Karin Hellwig, 'Investigaciones sobre arte español en la Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg de Hamburgo. La estancia de Fritz Saxl en Madrid en 1927', *Anales de Historia del Arte*, 18, 2008, 211–239.

<sup>5</sup> Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers.

every sheet, namely the El Greco album, which supplements the written sources eminently. The better part of these photographs concerns paintings or details of paintings by El Greco together with works or details of works by Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian and other Renaissance masters. Considering the contribution of the Viennese art historian to the study of Spanish art the following article intends to give a short review on his quite innovative methodological approach to El Greco and Velázquez.

### **The trip to Spain in 1927**

Saxl's trip to Spain seems to have been the idea of Warburg.<sup>6</sup> But beyond Warburg's tasks to study the works of Rubens and to discover illustrated astrological manuscripts, Saxl conducted his own research in preparation for a lecture course on Spanish painting in the time of El Greco and Velázquez, announced at the Kunsthistorisches Seminar of Hamburg University in the summer term of 1927. His early interest in the painting of the 17th century and in Rembrandt is well known. That he was already interested in Velázquez when he was an adolescent is shown by the fact that, in 1905, at the age of fifteen, he bought Walter Gensel's book *Velázquez* in the series *Klassiker der Kunst*. In the Kunsthistorisches Museum he also had the opportunity to study a great number of paintings by the master. Moreover, from a lecture he gave at the Hamburg University during the summer semester of 1925 we know that Saxl was concerned with Anthonis Mor as a predecessor of Rembrandt and as court portraitist of Charles V and Philip II.<sup>7</sup> From Mor to the court painter of Philip IV was just a little step and this step Saxl intended to make in a lecture, too. Therefore a trip to Spain was inevitable, since the greater part of the paintings of Velázquez were exhibited at the Prado in Madrid and those by El Greco could also be seen in the churches of Toledo.

Saxl intensified his research on Velázquez and El Greco in 1927. Neither master was discovered by art historians until the second half of the nineteenth century. Numerous books on Velázquez appeared in the last two decades of the century.<sup>8</sup> The sources known at that time were published in Gregorio Cruzada Villamil's *Anales de la vida y la obra de Velázquez* of 1885, and three years later Carl Justi's monumental *Diego Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert*, which swiftly assumed the status of a standard work, appeared. Both authors celebrated Velázquez as a genius, as the 'most Spanish' of Spanish painters, as the summit of painting in the *Siglo de Oro*, as a unique phenomenon, someone who had no predecessors and whose art resembled that of Rubens and the Italians, without being influenced by either. The authors Stevenson, Beruete and Picón in the 1890s presented the artist in a different way as primarily 'modern' and as predecessor of the impressionists.

<sup>6</sup> Hellwig, 'Investigaciones sobre arte español', 211–239.

<sup>7</sup> Aby Warburg, *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg. Aby Warburg, mit Einträgen von Gertrud Bing und Fritz Saxl*, Karen Michels and Charlotte Schoell-Glass, eds, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001, 29.

<sup>8</sup> For the research on Velázquez see Juan Antonio Gaya Nuño, *Bibliografía crítica y antológica de Velázquez*, Madrid: Fundación Lázaro Galdiano, 1963 and Javier Portús Pérez, *Entre dos centenarios. Bibliografía crítica y antológica de Velázquez 1962 – 1999*, Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, 2000.

El Greco was discovered even later than Velázquez and was also considered an unique phenomenon. It was not until 1908 that Manuel Cossio published his substantial monograph with critical catalogue, and this was supplemented two years later by a volume with documents by San Román.<sup>9</sup> Both artists were fêted in major exhibitions around 1900. On the occasion of the 3rd centenary of Velázquez's birth in 1899 the Sala Velázquez was inaugurated in the main hall of the Prado. Three years later, a great exhibition was dedicated to El Greco in the Rotonda of the Prado. At the time of Saxl's studies the *Grundlagenforschung* on both artists was in some way complete. In the meantime El Greco had surpassed Velázquez in popularity in Germany. It was not only the expressionists and the artists of the Blaue Reiter who had discovered the painter from Crete as 'modern'. The art historians too had changed their interests. Julius Meier-Graefe, for example, went to Spain in 1908 to see Velázquez, who totally disappointed him; he then 'discovered' El Greco instead. While Heinrich Wölfflin wrote about Velázquez in 1899, Max Dvořák created new aesthetic categories for the discussion of El Greco as a predecessor of expressionism in 1922. Velázquez was in a way dethroned, Greco enthroned.

Saxl – we should say in advance – did not take part in this change of paradigm. To be sure, he was planning a lecture course on Spanish painting in the time of El Greco and Velázquez, but everything else suggests that he was primarily interested in the court painter of Philip IV. Warburg too was concerned exclusively with Velázquez; he writes to Madrid that he is looking forward to the 'Velázquez-Gespräche' with his Saxl when he returns to Hamburg.<sup>10</sup> Having himself made familiar with the subject through Justi's *Velázquez*, and with the extensively illustrated Velázquez book by Walter Gensel in his pocket, Saxl went almost daily to the Prado and spent many hours there looking at paintings. His detailed notes contain descriptions, thoughts on content, comparisons with other paintings and so forth. Furthermore he made little sketches of the compositions of some paintings. In the margins of the illustrations in his Velázquez-volume he made annotations in pencil – always the librarian – concerning the colours and compositions of the originals. And for some of the paintings he also ordered photographs. Saxl's approach to Velázquez was, from the start, very emotional and enthusiastic. After his first visit to the Prado he wrote on the 30th of March to Warburg in elevated fashion: 'Velázquez is perfection in many regards.' He noted, that he has 'discovered' him, that his paintings, when duly questioned, 'tell marvellous things'. He also wrote of a 'gradual approach to the one specific Velázquez'. Saxl was very impressed by the fact that one is able to discover almost the complete work of the master in three adjacent rooms in the Prado, which 'makes it possible to oversee his development in such a way that one notices immediately when something new emerges'. His desire to see the 'whole Velázquez' made Saxl choose an itinerary

<sup>9</sup> For the research on El Greco see José Álvarez Lopera, *De Ceán a Cossío: La Fortuna crítica del Greco en el siglo XIX*, vol 2, *El Greco: Textos, documentos y bibliografía*, Madrid: Publicaciones de la Fundación universitaria española, 1987 y José Álvarez Lopera, *El Greco: estudio y catálogo, I: Fuentes y bibliografía*, Madrid: Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico, 2005.

<sup>10</sup> For the quotations of the correspondence between Saxl and Warburg during the stay of the former in Spain see Hellwig, 'Investigaciones sobre arte español', 211–239.

back to Hamburg via Modena, Vienna and Budapest, where he could see other paintings by the artist.

With the painter from Crete, on the other hand, Saxl had difficulties at first. Immediately after his first visit to the Prado he wrote to Warburg: 'I find El Greco interesting, but basically monotonous'. Only after his first visit to Toledo did he seem to have come to an understanding of the painter, who he declared had 'now something new and vivid' for him. However, when one considers his notes, Saxl seems to have been preoccupied much more intensely with Velázquez than with El Greco during his stay in Spain. On the last day in Madrid he concluded: 'Greco has not become as clear to me as Velázquez.'

### **New questions looking at the Old Masters**

What, however, had triggered Saxl's interest in Velázquez? From the letters to Warburg it becomes clear that Saxl was not interested in documents at all. He was also not interested in problems of attribution. About art historians who were interested in such problems he commented pejoratively: 'The V.-literature is in an awful state. There are two types: the archive-researcher and the connoisseur'. Saxl did however show a great interest in the dating of paintings, which was related to his interest in reconstructing the artist's stylistic development; in this sense he was a follower of *Stilgeschichte*. In his view it was very difficult to date the paintings of Velázquez and he felt that the secondary literature left many questions unanswered. New and innovative for the time was Saxl's desire to find predecessors and to integrate Velázquez into a larger circle of European painters of his time. As already noted, in Saxl's day the artist was considered a 'Spanish genius' who came from nowhere, without predecessors or paradigm. He observed the influence of Caravaggio on his early works and of Rubens later on, and drew analogies between the developments of Velázquez and Rembrandt. Enthusiastically he noted the importance of antiquity for the Spanish painters, especially of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and the illustrations by Tempesta for Velázquez. Here we can see his interest in the *Problem des Nachlebens der Antike im Barock*. He was also very interested in the historical background, the situation of Spain in the 17th century, contemporary theatre and festivals.

### **Saxl's contribution to Warburg's interpretation of Velázquez's *Hilanderas***

The results of the Saxl's prolonged stay in Spain emerged in a number of different forms. One (indirect) result of his work on Velázquez was Warburg's interpretation of the *Hilanderas* as an allegory of weaving in an entry on July 18<sup>th</sup>, 1927 of the *Tagebuch der Kulturwissenschaftlichen Bibliothek Warburg*.<sup>11</sup> There it remained hidden until the publication of the diary in 2001. With this entry Warburg delivered a new iconographic reading of the Velázquez painting, which had been considered an early 'factory picture' lacking any mythological or allegorical content. Until recently Diego Angulo Íñiguez's interpretation of the painting as a representation of *Fabula*

<sup>11</sup> See Hellwig, 'Interpretaciones iconográficas', 45–49.

*de Aracne*, dating from 1948, still counted as a pioneering result. Warburg came to this interpretation by identifying for the first time the scene in the background as the contest between Pallas and Arachne, establishing a connection between that scene and the scene of the spinning women in the foreground. Warburg's attention to similarities in the language of gestures and movements that were reiterated since antiquity, for the *Nachleben der Antike* and the *Pathosformeln*, such as the *Quos Ego*, had been trained by his work on the *Mnemosyne Atlas*. He identified the etching of Tempesta's *Pallas und Arachne* from the *Metamorphoses*, edition of 1604, as the model for the background-scene of Velázquez' *Hilanderas*. It's obvious now that Saxl's stay in Spain, as well as the two scholars' conversations on Velázquez had played a fundamental role in this interpretation. It was Saxl who has discovered the major role of illustrations the illustrations of the *Metamorphoses* by Antonio Tempesta, for the painters of the *Siglo de Oro*, but it was Warburg's achievement to combine, to put all aspects together and to get to the interpretation.<sup>12</sup>

### The review of Mayer's El Greco book

A more direct result of Saxl's stay was the review of Mayer's *El Greco* published in the same year of 1927.<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that this is one of very few reviews written by Saxl. Mayer was curator at the Alte Pinakothek in Munich and professor at the Munich University.<sup>14</sup> He had already published various articles and books on Velázquez and El Greco, but his publications were esteemed neither by Warburg nor by Saxl. In the Spanish correspondence we can find a number of negative remarks about his works. In 1926 Mayer published a monumental luxurious edition – monumental primarily in dimension, extent and price – with the title *Dominico Theotocopuli El Greco. Kritisches und illustriertes Verzeichnis des Gesamtwerkes*.<sup>15</sup> The editors of *Kritische Berichte zur Kunsthistorischen Literatur*, a newly founded review-journal, with the objective – as Wilhelm Pinder noted in the editorial statement – to maintain 'clarity of scientific thought', asked Saxl to write a review of Mayer's book. The review appeared at the end of 1927 in the third issue of *Kritische Berichte* and is one of the longer contributions. Yet the beginning is very dramatic: 'sure enough, this book is ill-omened' and it is in this style that the whole review continues with one negative remark after another. In the five sections of his review Saxl tore Mayer's book to pieces. The first part contains a harsh critique of the illustrations, their quality and their choice, complaining that some of them were cropped – Saxl writes of 'amputations of the paintings' –, that some were too small and so on. In the second part Saxl amends the incomplete bibliography with no fewer than twenty-four titles. The critical catalogue of the oeuvre he considered as deficient and the dating of El Greco's life and works as 'meagre'. In the presentation of the master's development he misses a study of the main problem and the failure

<sup>12</sup> See Hellwig, 'Investigaciones sobre arte español', 233–235.

<sup>13</sup> Saxl, 'Rezension von August L. Mayer', 86–96.

<sup>14</sup> For Mayer see Teresa Posada Kubissa, *August L. Mayer y la pintura española. Ribera, Goya, El Greco, Velázquez*, Madrid: CEEH, 2009.

<sup>15</sup> August L. Mayer, *Dominico Theotocopuli El Greco. Kritisches und illustriertes Verzeichnis des Gesamtwerkes*, München: Franz Hanfstaengl, 1926 and Saxl 'Rezension von August L. Mayer', 86–96.

to mention his relation to mannerism. The weakest aspect of the book, however, in Saxl's view, was Mayer's attempt to prove the influence of certain religious ideas on the painter from Crete. Also he was very harsh in his judgement on Mayer's aesthetic appreciation of the painter. Saxl's own contributions to the topic were few but very innovative in their attempt to point out sources for El Greco. He was the first scholar to point out that the pose of *Laocoon* was similar to that of the ancient statue of the *Falling Gaul*, a thesis that is still accepted.

The reactions to his harsh review followed quickly. Mayer himself wrote a letter to the editors of the journal and complained bitterly about such an unfair treatment. Everybody in the community of scholars was informed about this dispute – copies of the correspondence between Mayer and Pinder were forwarded – and excitement rose accordingly. The dispute Saxl's review has caused gives an insight into the spectrum of approaches among German art historians of the 1920s, especially the gap between the 'superficial' way of engaging in research utilizing basically formalistic analysis on the one hand, and the profound understanding of art history as *Problemggeschichte* of the art historians at the Kulturwissenschaftliche Bibliothek Warburg in Hamburg on the other.

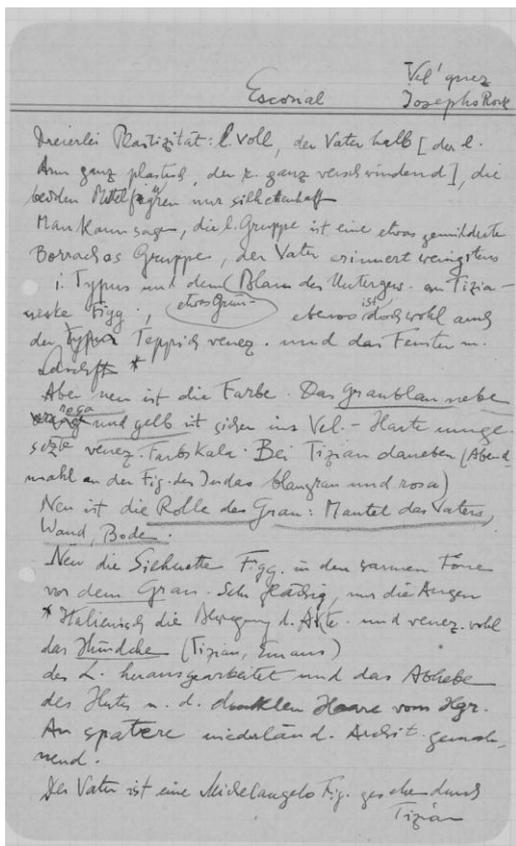


Fig. 1: Fritz Saxl, Notes on Velázquez's Joseph's Blood-stained Coat brought to Jacob 1927, pencil on Paper, 16x10cm, Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers



Fig. 2: Fritz Saxl, Sketch after Velázquez's Joseph's Blood-stained Coat brought to Jacob 1927, Ink on Paper, Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers

### The 'Spanish notes'

Already a first examination of the 'Spanish notes' shows the innovative nature of Saxl's approach to anchor Velázquez and El Greco in the European art scene of the 17th century.<sup>16</sup> (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) He associated for the first time – what has become accepted today – the connective lines from Caravaggio and Rubens to Velázquez, drew exciting parallels between Velázquez and Rembrandt and worked out the importance of Ovid's illustrations for Velázquez' paintings. Thus Saxl corrected the perception of Velázquez as an unique artist who created his works detached from time and space, as the 'most Spanish of the Spanish painters', who – as Carl Justi pointed out – had survived a meeting with Rubens as well as his two stays in Italy without any 'ruinous influence'.<sup>17</sup> With his method of pointing out certain developments and quering pictorial traditions and models as well as links between Velázquez and other European painters of his time, Saxl turns out to have been pathin the way. He had anticipated a number of questions later posed by Velázquez scholars. It was his approach which became pioneering for understanding Spanish painting in pan-European artistic trends. His approach to Spanish painters of the Baroque era was indeed innovative compared to that of his contemporaries.



Fig. 3: Fritz Saxl, *El Greco-Album: Plate 6*, 1927, brown cardboard with mounted photos, 39.2x 44.5 cm, Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers

<sup>16</sup> Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers.

<sup>17</sup> Carl Justi, *Diego Velázquez und sein Jahrhundert*, 2 vols., Bonn: Cohen, 1888, vol. 1, 246–254.

### The *El Greco-Album*

Further research revealed with the 'El Greco-Album' a veritable *trouvaille*, namely a set of ten bounded plates of brown cardboard with forty-two, unlabelled, black and white photos of paintings, wall paintings and engravings on every plate.<sup>18</sup> (Fig. 3) It was possible to attribute the album of plates to Saxl, who compiled it in 1927 as didactical material for his lecture course at the university. The plates show a selection of photos of El Greco's paintings or details of paintings and of comparative details from various works of Italian Renaissance masters such as Raphael, Michelangelo, Titian etc. These works would seem to have inspired El Greco in his search for strikingly expressive poses and gestures. The plates reveal Saxl's innovative way of assembling images and is reminiscent of the plates of Warburg's *Mnemosyne-Atlas*.

It is a fact that there had been earlier efforts, notably by Cossío and Roger Fry (1920) to eradicate the labelling of El Greco's art as 'extravagant' or bizarre, and position it in a European artistic tradition. Yet Saxl's contribution was different. Inspired by Warburg he discerned specific forms of expressive and persuasive power. Thus Saxl revealed the rhetorical nature of El Greco's art. Moreover, by showing El Greco's repetition of those forms, it would appear that he has provided further evidence of his documented practice of fixing a form in clay, plaster or wax and then using it as a model in subsequent images. Saxl in his preoccupation with El Greco was in search of 'continuity and variations' not only in the form but also in the meaning of images. His profound interest in survival and imitation of artists' vocabulary of forms, and especially in the formulization of those that are highly emotive, reflect Warburg's researches into *Mnemosyne* and *Pathosformel*.<sup>19</sup> Inspired by Warburg he discerned specific forms of expressive and persuasive power, of *Gebärdensprache*. Saxl's *El Greco-Album* reveals not only the distinctive nature and importance of Saxl's contribution to our understanding of El Greco's creative process but also provide an array of stylistic sources which have not yet been identified in the literature on the artist.

Saxl's 'Spanish notes' and the *El Greco-Album* are extremely important historiographical documents revealing his quite innovative methodological approach on this subject, far ahead of his contemporaries' approach to Spanish

<sup>18</sup> See Warburg Institute Archive, Saxl Papers. An elaborate study 'Das "El Greco-Album" von Fritz Saxl (1927)' by the author of this article is to be published in 2012 in the *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte*.

<sup>19</sup> For Warburg and the *Mnemosyne Atlas* see Aby Warburg, *Gesammelte Schriften: Studienausgabe. 2. Abt., Band 2.1. Der Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*, Martin Warnke and Claudia Brink, eds, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2000; Exh. cat. *Aby Warburg: Bildersammlung zur Geschichte von Sternglaube und Sternkunde*, Wien, Akademie der Bildenden Künste and Hamburg, Planetarium, 1993; Peter van Huisstede, 'Der Mnemosyne-Atlas. Ein Laboratorium der Bildgeschichte', in Robert Galitz and Brita Reimers, eds, *Aby Warburg. Ekstatische Nymphe ... trauernder Flußgott'. Portrait eines Gelehrten*, Hamburg: Dölling and Galitz, 1995, 130–171; Michael Diers, 'Atlas und Mnemosyne. Von der Praxis der Bildtheorie bei Aby Warburg', in Klaus Sachs-Hombach, ed, *Bildtheorien. Anthropologische und kulturelle Grundlagen des Visualistic Turn*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 2008, 181–213; Isolde Schiffermüller, 'Wort und Bild im Atlas Mnemosyne. Zur pathetischen Eloquenz der Sprache Aby Warburgs', in Peter Kofler, ed, *Ekstatische Kunst – Besonnenes Wort. Aby Warburg und die Denkräume der Ekphrasis*, Wien: Studien-Verlag, 2009, 7–21, Claudia Wedepohl, "'Wort und Bild". Aby Warburg als Sprachbildner', in Peter Kofler, ed., *Ekstatische Kunst*, 23–46.

painting as 'national' phenomenon, based on a mainly formalistic analysis of the paintings. With his method of searching for pictorial traditions and models as well as links between El Greco, Velázquez and other European painters the scholar shows for the period quite innovative ways and perspectives. Saxl's approach to Spanish art reveals his closeness to the Warburgian method of considering the history of art as *Problemggeschichte* and the works of art as *Auseinandersetzungsubjekte*, as a dialectic between an individual expressive impulse and an inherited repertoire of forms and meanings.

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