

The Great Theater of the World by Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton

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The paper takes as its focus the theatrical *oeuvre* of Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton – a Polish émigré artist and the daughter of an eminent Polish émigré writer Józef Wittlin. It presents a concise introduction to the artistic work of Wittlin Lipton – her costume and set designs – which she has been creating on the European (Spain) and North American continents (United States) since late seventies of the previous century onwards. Biographical facts have been outlined here along with the most characteristic features of her artistic style, with a special emphasis laid on the Spanish *genius loci* which should be regarded as the most outstanding trait of her total work.

The paper constitutes a part of a book devoted to the life and artistic achievements of Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton which the author of this manuscript has been currently writing.

Key words: theatrical costume and set design, Spanish *genius loci*, émigré artist

Polish *Émigré* Literature and Art – An Introduction

There can be no denying that the Polish literature and art created outside the country since the beginning of the previous century has an enduring fascination for critics. Polish literary achievements have been thoroughly described in numerous monographic studies on both writers who left Poland just before the outbreak of World War II, like Witold Gombrowicz, Czesław Straszewicz, or Andrzej Bobkowski, as well as those who were part of the “war emigration,” who for political reasons were com-

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pelled to seek refuge outside Europe when the war broke out. Here I have in mind Józef Wittlin, Jan Lechoń, or Kazimierz Wierzyński, to name just a few. Some abandoned Poland as infants or teenagers, such as Andrzej Busza² and Eva Hoffman.³ Others, like Anna Frajlich⁴ or Stanisław Barańczak,⁵ were forced to leave Poland much later – in the 1960s or 80s. The European destinations most frequently chosen by Polish émigré writers were London and Paris. In the former, the Polish literary activity gained a boost in the 1940s, when the *Wiadomości* social and cultural weekly was published in 1946. The latter became home to a Polish-language publishing house, Instytut Literacki [The Literary Institute], headed by Jerzy Giedroyc. The *Kultura* [Culture] monthly journal was published there from 1948 to 2000.

Outside of Europe, Polish writers emigrated to the United States (e.g. Czesław Miłosz, Henryk Grynberg, Józef Wittlin, Anna Frajlich), Canada (Andrzej Busza, Bogdan Czayowski) and Central or South America (Sławomir Mrożek and Witold Gombrowicz, respectively).

From the beginning of the last century, Polish art has been created alongside the émigré literature. The most comprehensive studies on this subject are on the milieu of Polish painters based in Great Britain and in Italy. Monographs on art of Marian Bohusz-Szysko, Halima Nałęcz, or Wojciech Falkowski might be singled out,⁶ as well as a separate study on Polish artists known as “Anders’ Artists,”⁷ who settled in Great Britain after World War II. This group included Józef Czapski, Stanisław Gliwa, Zygmunt Turkiewicz, and Karol Badura, to name just a few.

The Polish-French artistic milieu was also the subject of a separate analysis of Polish art in France in 1890–1919.⁸ Last but not least, Polish art in North Amer-

² Andrzej Busza (born 1938, Poland) is a Polish-Canadian poet, essayist and translator, author of several collections of poems; Professor Emeritus of English literature at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada; in 1939 his family left Poland and fled through Romania to Palestine, where they lived until 1947; from 1947 to 1965 he resided in London, Great Britain; in 1965 Busza moved to Vancouver, Canada.

³ Eva Hoffman (born 1945, Poland) is a Polish-American writer and professor of literature and creative writing at Columbia University, the University of Minnesota and MIT; author of several novels; in 1959 she emigrated with her parents and sister to Canada; she lives in London.

⁴ Anna Frajlich (born 1942, Kirgizstan) is a Polish poet and senior lecturer in Polish literature at Columbia University in New York. Following an anti-semitic campaign in 1968, she was driven from Poland, and with her husband and their small son, they emigrated via Rome to the United States (New York).

⁵ Stanisław Barańczak (1946–2014) was a Polish poet, literary critic, translator, scholar. He was fired from Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań for his involvement in politics. He left Poland for political reasons in 1981 and emigrated to the United States, where he was offered an academic post at Harvard University.

⁶ Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, *Marian Bohusz-Szysko: Życie i twórczość 1901–1995* (Wydawnictwo Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego, Lublin 1995); *Halima Nałęcz* (Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, Toruń 2007); *Wojciech Falkowski. Malarstwo. Painting* (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curii Skłodowskiej, Lublin 2005); *Sztuka w oczekalni. Studia z dziejów plastyki polskiej na emigracji 1939–1989* (Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Mikołaja Kopernika, Toruń 2012).

⁷ Jan Wiktor Sienkiewicz, *Artyści Andersa. Uratowani z “niełudzkiej ziemi”* (Non omnis, Warsaw 2017).

⁸ Ewa Bobrowska-Jakubowska, *Artyści polscy we Francji w latach 1890–1919. Wspólnoty i indywidualności* (Wydawnictwo DIG, Warsaw 2004).

ica has been documented in two works entitled – *Z polskim rodowodem. Artyści polscy i amerykańscy polskiego pochodzenia w sztuce Stanów Zjednoczonych w latach 1900–1980* (*With the Polish Ancestry: Polish Artists and American Artists of Polish Descent in the Art of the United States in 1900–1980*; trans. J. Budzik)⁹ and *Portret trzech pokoleń polskich artystów plastyków na emigracji w Kanadzie w latach 1939–1989* (*A Portrait of Three Generations of Polish Émigré Visual Artists in Canada in 1938–1989*, trans. J. Budzik).¹⁰ These two books are crucial to an understanding of the idiosyncrasies of Polish art created abroad, but neither should be regarded as an exhaustive source of knowledge on Polish art on the North American continent, especially as, in either case, the author’s analysis does not go beyond the 1980s.

Therefore, there is still an urgent need to extend the scope of research on the Polish art in North America after the 1980s, and also in other European countries where such studies have yet to be conducted. There is a strong correspondence between various fields of art, and so more often than not, literature influences art and art, literature. This observation also concerns Polish émigré writers and visual artists, whose work is often interdisciplinary.

Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton – a Polish-born costume and set designer, the daughter of Józef Wittlin, the eminent Polish émigré writer, is a good case in point here.

Although her impressive, interdisciplinary *oeuvre* deserves a complete study to highlight features of her theatrical designs, so far her art has been overshadowed by Józef Wittlin’s literary output.¹¹ This changed recently, when the Institute of Literature and the Judaica Jewish Cultural Center staged an exhibition of her theater costumes and set designs in Krakow in 2019. Most visitors of this exhibition saw Wittlin Lipton’s art for the first time, and, as one may assume, many were unaware of the fact that Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has been part of the American and Spanish theater and art scene since the late 70s.¹²

Unfortunately, her name features neither in *With the Polish Ancestry...*, whose overview ends at the beginning of the 1980s, nor in any other publication examining different aspects of Polish set design.¹³ No work on the Polish émigré artistic milieu

⁹ Szymon Bojko, *Z polskim rodowodem. Artyści polscy i amerykańscy polskiego pochodzenia w sztuce Stanów Zjednoczonych w latach 1900–1980* (Oficyna Wydawnicza Kucharski, Toruń 2007).

¹⁰ Katarzyna Szrodt, *Portret trzech pokoleń polskich artystów plastyków na emigracji w Kanadzie w latach 1939–1989* – a PhD dissertation defended at the University of Warsaw in 2016.

¹¹ Józef Wittlin (1896–1976) was a novelist, essayist, poet and translator, author of *Sól ziemi* (*Salt of the Earth*), *Mój Lwów* (*My Lviv*), *Orfeusz w piekle XX wieku* (*Orpheus in the Hell of the Twentieth Century*), and *Hymny* (*Hymns*).

¹² The author of this paper is preparing to publish a monograph entitled *Ojczyzny artystyczne Elżbiety Wittlin Lipton* (*Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton’s Artistic Homelands*).

¹³ I have in mind a recent publication: *Odstony Współczesnej scenografii. Problemy-sylwetki-rozmowy* (*An Outline of Contemporary Set Designs: Problems-Images-Discussions*; trans. J. Budzik). Ed. Katarzyna Fazan, Agnieszka Marszałek, Jadwiga Rożek-Sieraczyńska (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, Krakow 2016).

in Spain has been published to date – and this is Wittlin Lipton’s adoptive country, where she has been working on and off for different theaters since the late 1990s.

The main purpose of this paper is to present Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton’s theater designs through the most outstanding examples of her artistic accomplishments. Since her whole life has been marked by the immigrant experience, and by living on two continents – North America and Europe – this manuscript will also reveal the extent to which the artist’s work is inflected by different culture contexts and by her own literary and painterly fascinations.

Transcending Geographical Borders

In 1940, at the age of eight, Elżbieta Wittlin fled Poland with her mother Halina Wittlin. They headed west, to Paris, where Józef Wittlin awaited them. The writer had to leave Poland in June 1939 due to the anti-Jewish campaigns of the radical right-wing party. The Wittlins and other Polish writers and artists (such as Jan Lechoń, Kazimierz Wierzyński, and Rafał Malczewski) tried to obtain exit visas to the United States; from France they traveled to Spain and Portugal, where the Wittlins were finally given visas to the USA.

Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton’s American odyssey began in 1941; it is divided into three periods. The first lasted from 1941 to 1955, the second from 1957 to 1962, the third and the final period lasted over thirty years, from 1975 to 2006. She would live in New York for most of this time, except for her years in Chicago, where she resided with her husband, Michel Lipton, from 1983 to 1986. Her time in the United States overlapped with her time in Spain. Wittlin Lipton lived in Madrid in 1955–1957 and in 1962–1975; in 2006 she made the decision to move to Europe and settled in Madrid.

Not only did she frequently change places of abode, but she has also traveled widely; so far she has visited over forty countries across the world.¹⁴ This enriching experience of living between the American and the European continents, combined with the Liptons’ journeys to different corners of the globe, must have refined her sensitivity to culture and context-specific art, which later reverberated in her costume and set designs.

She has profited a lot from the fact that she was raised in an outstanding literary and artistic milieu in which her parents and their friends – Jan Lechoń, Halina and Kazimierz Wierzyński, Zygmunt Menkes, Artur Rubinstein, Arturo Toscanini – must have had a major influence on her intellectual development. Later in her adult life,

¹⁴ Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has visited Austria, Belgium, Czechia, Denmark, England, Greece, the Netherlands, Hungary, Italy, Portugal, Switzerland, Turkey, Egypt, Hong Kong, Canada, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Uruguay, Panama, Tanzania, Syria, Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and Thailand.

she made new, artistically stimulating acquaintances with distinguished Spanish and American poets, playwrights, and outstanding literary critics and theater design specialists. These included Paul Steinberg, Vicente Aleixandre,¹⁵ Francisco Brines,¹⁶ José Hierro,¹⁷ Francisco Nieva,¹⁸ and Antonio Regalado¹⁹. Wittlin Lipton has maintained friendships with them for many years²⁰.

In Spain and in the United States she attended classes in Spanish literature, culture and language – in the 1950s at Ciudad Universaria (Madrid), and at the end of the 1970s, at Hunter College (New York), where she was a student of José Olivio Jiménez, an outstanding literary critic and specialist in Ibero-American literature. She also worked as an interior designer in Madrid and in New York.

Gradually, she was more and more committed to drawing and to honing her skills in costume and set design for theatrical performances. In 1979, Wittlin Lipton embarked on a course at the elite Parsons School of Design in New York, where she took classes in interior and theater design run by Professor Paul Steinberg, an experimental theater specialist. She created her first costume and set designs under his watchful eye. The time spent at Parsons marked the symbolic beginning of Wittlin Lipton's career as a set designer.

Since the late 1970s, Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has created costumes and sets for nearly forty theater performances both in the United States and in Spain. These belong to the Polish (*Yvonne, Princess of Burgundy* and *The Marriage* by Witold Gombrowicz), Spanish (*The Autos Sacramentales, The Phantom Lady, The Great Theater of the World* by Pedro Calderón de la Barca; *98* by Juan Antonio Castro; *Lorca in the Theater of Skulls* and *It is Difficult to Live Upside Down* by Dionisio Cañas), Greek (*Medea* by Sophocles), English (*Othello, The Midsummer's Night Dream* by William Shakespeare, *The Birthday of the Infanta* by Oscar Wilde), Italian (*The Mistress of the Inn* by Carlo Goldoni), French (*Deathwatch* by Jean Genet), German (*The Threepenny Opera* by Bertolt Brecht) and Czech (*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* by Milan

¹⁵ Vicente Aleixandre (1898–1984) was a Spanish poet; in 1977 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature; he was a member of a group of poets known as "Generation 27" (1923–1927) to which belonged Federico Garcia Lorca, Rafael Alberti and Luis Cernuda.

¹⁶ Francisco Brines (born in 1932) is a Spanish poet, representative of a poetic group known as "Generation 50." He has been awarded the Premio Nacional de las Letras Españolas (1999) and Federico García Lorca Prize (2007).

¹⁷ José Hierro (1922–2002) belonged to the postwar generation of poets; he is the author of several collections of poetry; in 1981 he received the Prince Asturias Award, and in 1998, the Cervantes Award.

¹⁸ Francisco Nieva (1924–2016) was a Spanish playwright, set and costume designer, painter, and the author of several dozens of dramas. He was the creator of *teatro furioso, teatro de farsa y calamidad, and teatro de cronica y estampa*.

¹⁹ Antonio Regalado (1932–2012) was a literary critic, essayist, philosopher, and a specialist on the works of Pedro Calderón de la Barca and Cervantes.

²⁰ Aleixandre, F. Brines, and J. Hierro knew Józef Wittlin whose writings they all highly esteemed. Brines translated Wittlin's selected poems into Spanish, and Wittlin rendered selected poems by V. Aleixandre, F. Brines, and J. Hierro into Polish.

Kundera) literary traditions. All have been distinguished by painting techniques Wittlin Lipton employs for her designs. This proves she is thoroughly grounded in art, which remains one of her greatest fascinations and inspirations.

In the following section of this paper, I will examine the artistic techniques and the distinctive features of Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton's theater drawings with reference to several of her projects for American and Spanish theaters.

Painterly Inspirations and Expressionist Experiments

Since the beginning of her career as a set designer, Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has been working on the cusp of two different worlds of art – the literary and the visual. Her costume and set designs prove that she has mastered the art of translating a written text into the language of theater which requires an artist have a thorough understanding of the deeper meanings and symbols that render a play both more complex and more interesting.

At Parsons, Wittlin Lipton created costumes and sets for *The Midsummer's Night Dream* and *Othello* by William Shakespeare, *The Cenci* by Persy Besshe Shelley, *Salome* by Oscar Wilde, *Electra* by Sophocles, *Deathwatch* by Jean Genet, and *No Exit* by Jean Paul Sartre. All of these deserve a study unto themselves, but for the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to discuss the designs for *Salome* and *Deathwatch*, as they brilliantly exemplify Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton's idiosyncratic style.

The costume designed for *Salome* – the female avenger and seducer from Oscar Wilde's interpretation of the biblical story – bears some resemblance to fifteenth-century depictions of this woman. Here I have in mind the paintings of Renaissance artists such as Fra Filippo Lippi (*Herod's Feast*), Sandro Botticelli (*Salome with the Head of Saint John the Baptist*), or Giovanni di Paolo (*Herod's Feast*). The same motif was explored by the Renaissance German painter Lucas Cranach the Elder (*Salome*) and, much later, by the Polish-Jewish artist Maurycy Gottlieb (*The Dance of Salome*).

Wittlin Lipton must have known these paintings, and it is very likely that Cranach's works were her main source of inspiration. The German artist created a whole collection of images of *Salome*. Though they differ in detail, Cranach painted most of them as young, innocent-looking girls with long ginger-and-gold hair adorned with a big, brown hat. In one hand they hold the bleeding head of John the Baptist, and in the other they clumsily heft a sword. They are not looking at the head of the poor man, and surprisingly enough, some of them have a girlish smile on their faces. Wittlin Lipton paints Oscar Wilde's protagonist in a similar manner, but her *Salome* is an elderly, graceless woman casting a contemptuous look at the Jokanaan (John the Baptist) head. She embellished *Salome's* dress with details using the collage technique. She mixed different materials, such as felt, lace, sequins, and colorful bits

of paper. In subsequent theatrical projects (e.g. *The Lady Phantom*, *Medea*), Wittlin Lipton often experimented with the same mixed-media technique.²¹

The Artist's costume design for *Salome* reveals her attention to intense and contrasting colors. In an interview, Wittlin Lipton admitted that she has always been strongly influenced by Józef Czapski – an outstanding Polish painter, a colorist, a writer and a member of the Kapist art group.²² Color saturation is also a characteristic feature of the German Expressionist painting. Wittlin Lipton singles out the works of Emil Nolde and Oskar Kokoschka as the most inspiring in her examples of brave “experimentation” with colors. Wittlin Lipton holds the German Expressionists in high esteem not only because she regards them as audacious colorists. She is also fascinated by the intense emotional expression of their work, which shows in the colors, the anatomical distortions of the figures, and in the underlying pessimism, anxiety and fear.²³ Pessimistic, or even catastrophic emotions also inflect some of Wittlin Lipton's own drawings. This trait is found both in her picture of *Salome* and in her costume designs for Jean Genet's *Deathwatch*.

The pictures for *Deathwatch* might be classified as both set and costume designs. Wittlin Lipton succeeded in capturing the emotional state of Genet's protagonists – the Green-eyed and Maurice (two men who have been sentenced to prison). Their faces express anxiety and fear; they are dressed in typical striped prisoners' outfits. This time, her designs are not influenced by other artists' work. They should be regarded as another kind of experimentation with the collage technique. Moreover, Wittlin Lipton's approach fits some general assumptions of Expressionist and abstract painting – the central figures in her picture are set against a backdrop of chaotic stripes, and a web of abstract forms, which also makes the whole drawing resemble the paintings of Spanish *informel*²⁴ artist Antonio Tapies.

Another picture which Wittlin Lipton created for the same play is an original set design in which she combined her own picture of a prison guard with modern photography. The prison guard is a slim man wearing a short coat with a cape and black knee boots with spurs. Her picture reveals the real nature of the guard, whom Genet presents as a cynic and wangler. In order to better visualize the scene from Genet's play, Wittlin Lipton used modern black-and-white photography of the interior of an old, abandoned and dilapidated hangar, divided into small prison-like cells.

²¹ Assemblages and collages are two common examples of mixed media technique based on the idea of combining media or material, such as paper, cloth, etc., to create a work of art. Józef Szajna and Tadeusz Kantor often used mixed-media techniques in their paintings and theatrical performances.

²² Since 2018, the present author has conducted a series of interviews with Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton. The information on Józef Czapski comes from an interview recorded in Madrid on 5 July 2018.

²³ Compare with: Patricia Fride R. Carrassat, Isabelle Marcadé, *Style i kierunki w malarstwie* (Wydawnictwo Arkady, Warsaw 1999), pp. 103 and 105.

²⁴ *Art informel* is based on the idea of substituting figurative forms with abstract lines, dots and different entangled forms. The colors in paintings using this technique are often vivid and intense. Cf.: Patricia Fride, R. Carrassat, Isabelle Marcadé, *Style i kierunki ...*, p. 163.

The photo has three men sitting on the dank floor – two of them quite close to each other, the third one observing them from a distance. Though this is not a typical prison set design, it is very symbolic, expressing acute loneliness and self-inflicted oppression – feelings which torment Genet’s protagonists.

Although these costume and set designs were created at an early stage of her professional career, they all show Wittlin Lipton at her most mature: experimenting with colors and different artistic styles and techniques, knowing how to read a literary piece and to translate it into the language of set designs.

The Spanish Artistic *Genius Loci*

Even a cursory look at Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton’s work tells us that Spanish Baroque art had a great influence on her. It was a major source of inspiration when she created costumes for the plays written by such Spanish Baroque writers as Pedro Calderón de la Barca, but also for dramas belonging to different literary traditions.

The Spanish artistic *genius loci* in a more contemporary rendition can be traced in Wittlin Lipton’s costume designs for Bertold Brecht’s *The Threepenny Opera*²⁵ or to Alexander Dumas’ *The Lady of the Camellias*.²⁶ Yet there is no denying that her costumes for Calderon’s *The Great Theater of the World*²⁷ and to *The Autos Sacramentales*²⁸ are the best examples of the artist’s fascination for the Spanish *Siglo de Oro*.

Though Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has designed only one costume for *The Great Theater of the World*, it may be regarded as the most representative and symbolic of all her pictures for Calderón’s works. On the surface, it features a half-naked woman dressed in a long, wide skirt, but in fact this figure has both female and male physical traits. This mysterious person bears a strong resemblance to Diego Velázquez’s portraits of Infantas. His/her coiffure is identical to that of Infanta Maria Teresa of Spain, whom Velázquez immortalized in his paintings. The naked male torso is adorned with a necklace. S/he is wearing a boned bodice and farthingale extended skirt, on which Wittlin Lipton drew the map of the world. Interestingly enough, “The World,” as we might call this person, holds a pair of scissors in his right hand, with which he cuts the skirt in half. One gains the impression that the skirt is in fact a stage curtain. Small baby heads, a skull and the head of Cervantes are literally falling out from behind “the curtain,” giving the whole picture a catastrophic feel. In his left hand, the World holds a green handkerchief spangled with

²⁵ *The Threepenny Opera* was staged in Madrid in 2011 at Teatro Cóncono.

²⁶ *The Lady of the Camellias* was staged in Madrid in 2005 at Teatro Cóncono.

²⁷ *The Great Theatre of the World* was staged in 2006 in Madrid at Real Escuela Superior de Arte Dramático.

²⁸ *El Año Santo en Madrid* was staged in Madrid in 2006 at Teatro Delabarca.

black stars – an important element of “fashionable court dress”²⁹ in seventeenth-century Spain.

The Velázquez *genius loci* can also be traced in Wittlin Lipton’s other costume designs for Calderon’s *Autos Sacramentales entitled El Año Santo en Madrid*. The Baroque style reverberates in two of her designs for female characters from the *Autos* – Pride and Anger, though in the latter case, she tries to emulate the Velázquez style in a more ironic manner. The dresses of Pride and Anger are decorated with ruffles – another characteristic of the seventeenth-century fashion.

Some of the costumes designed for female characters in Brecht’s *The Three-penny Opera* were also inspired by a more modern version of the Spanish style – the picture of Jenny dressed in a typical flamenco outfit is a good case in point here.

Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton has often drawn inspiration from the greatest Spanish fashion designers of the twentieth century, such as Cristóbal Balenciaga. In her own costume designs, she has symbolically referred to characteristic details with which this Basque fashion designer often embellished his dresses. Here I have in mind the big ribbons which adorn the dresses Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton designed for Doña Angela from Calderón’s *The Phantom Lady*, for Marguerite from Dumas’ *The Lady of the Camellias*, or for Deyanira from Goldoni’s *The Mistress of the Inn*.

This introduction to selected theatrical works by Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton is bound to lead us to the conclusion that her total *oeuvre* is a fascinating and original example of art transcending all limitations of time and place. Wittlin Lipton’s work successfully integrates her sensitivity with her international experience and multicultural interests stimulated by her journeys. It is hard to believe that her costume and set designs have never been discussed along with the accomplishments of other great Polish artists such as Tadeusz Kantor or Krystyna Zachwatowicz-Wajda, though they deserve equal recognition.

The great theater of the world as painted by Elżbieta Wittlin Lipton is in fact a perfect artistic metaphor for the past and the present times viewed from a very personal and multinational perspective.

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²⁹ Antonio Domínguez Ortiz, Alfonso E. Pérez Sánchez, Julián Gállego, *Velázquez* (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1989), p. 250.

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