

In Transit White Paper  
Witnessing Genocide: The Expulsion of the Moriscos in Seven  
Monumental Paintings from the Kingdom of Valencia

E. Michael Gerli  
*University of Virginia*

The making of Spanish identity during the early modern period is a narrative that can be told from various perspectives. The most common one is triumphal and nationalistic: it tells a story of empire and of the Spanish Golden Age, *El Siglo de Oro*. It deals with territorial expansion, transoceanic adventure, social and political hegemony on a universal scale, and the flourishing of a literary and artistic culture of equal universal reach and transcendence. Yet below the surface of all this there is another tarnished tale, one with tragic human consequences that traces a story of powerful international and domestic conflict, of ethnic warfare and civil strife, as it sounds a somber counterpoint to the epic tenor of the golden plot. The latter is the saga of those Spaniards who were expelled from their nation in 1492, the Jews, and then much later the Moriscos (Muslims converted to Catholicism and their descendants) in 1609-1614, whose account is less well-known.

The full story of the Moriscos and its relevance to modernity has yet to be told: how they were banished from their native soil in 1609 and how those who survived the journey to North Africa or France arrived impoverished and starved; how Christian farmers forced those traveling to France to pay for water from a stream or to sit under the shade of a tree; how thousands who resisted deportation

and survived ended their days as slaves rowing in the king's galleys; how many of those waiting to board the ships that would carry them to exile were made to go hungry so that they would exchange their children for food; and how it was the official policy of the state to separate Morisco children from their parents to keep them in Spain and raise them as Christians, to then have them work as indentured servants.

The fundamental question posed by these strangely familiar occurrences is How did this calamity come to pass? Can the material evidence of the Expulsion help us to understand fully the nature of the events, especially the striking visual images that can still be seen in a series of seven monumental paintings commissioned by Philip III in 1612. The conflictive history of the events that the paintings portray, and the powerful way in which they portray them, does indeed emerge from a close inspection of what they visually contain. They are replete with detailed images of contradiction, heartbreak, and visual metaphors that display the artists' anxieties regarding the scenes of civil strife they were commissioned to commemorate for the Spanish Crown. Although the paintings' were intended to portray the military victory and administrative efficiency of Imperial Spain, upon close inspection the canvases also concede the moral victory to the Moriscos. They illustrate the problematic of what was claimed to be a just war against a perceived domestic enemy. The artists who painted the Expulsion joined their vision of events to a prominent minority of resisters who condemned the repressive policies of the state. Seen in the context of the larger debate surrounding the Expulsion, the

canvases acquire shadings that are not immediately visible today in the offices of the savings bank in Valencia where they are hung. Yet the argument of their significance to contemporary history in the Mediterranean World needs to be made and understood.

The human complexity and soul-wrenching nature of the Expulsion is displayed throughout the paintings, often compounded by striking visual metaphors and contradictions that permeate them. There is an urgent need to explore these further to more fully comprehend the paintings' larger pictorial meaning, which is most likely not entirely accessible or understood by today's viewers yet definitely meaningful for our understanding of forced migrations in the contemporary world. To appreciate fully the conflict portrayed between the King's policy and its implementation in these canvases requires "competent viewers," or observers who can view deeply, as it were, and connect the events in the background as the necessary precursors of what is portrayed in the foreground. Yet, even before the actual sequence of events dawns upon us, we are implicated from the very outset in the enormity of the experience and cannot assume a detached position. In fact, the responsive viewer is compelled to look more closely, deeper into the many scenes that are being simultaneously portrayed. The result is a forced confrontation between two planes: the immediate official proceedings and their brutal background. The temporal simultaneity of the actions portrayed defies the constraints of the picture's outward illusionistic world. On the surface the paintings present themselves as corographs (broad, panoramic city views or pictorial maps

that represent particular traits of an area), when they are really full chronicles of events, wherein chorography is a genre devoted only to the rendering of places, and chronicle the means for narrating about events in places and time. Attentive to the conventions of chorography, to panoramically depicting Denia, Valencia, Vinarós, Alicante, and the surrounding countryside in the Sierra de Cortes and the Valley of Laguar, and rubricated according to the place they are meant to evoke, this is, in fact, the way viewers are first meant to approach these pictures.

The canvases are far more than panoramic, static representations of the events of the expulsion, however. They are charged with poignant narrative and tell multiple stories that often foreclose any ideologically consistent message in them. There is clearly a foreground, meant to capture our immediate attention, and a background, that is much more difficult to discern both visually and semantically. Although encompassed by a unitary frame, the foreground and background seem often to oppose each other, as they narrate different versions of the events. We must look closely at the even more difficult to descry backdrop in order to grasp the complete meaning of the images, which forces us to search the entire setting for clues to the action unfolding in the foreground. To be sure, the foreground/background relation, due to the miniscule nature of the background, seems willfully to minimize and resist detailed scrutiny, at least for the casual observer.

The first things the casual viewer of these works notices are their size, their frames (on average 110 x 175 cms), and the images' panoramic sweep. Without the

containing frame, each picture is fragmented, so detailed and diffuse that it seems chaotic. The frame implies a beholder and reinforces the notion of the integrity of the gaze, since the pictures have two dramatic and psychological focal points—the foreground and the background—, each of which diffuses what the whole picture actually displays. The complete focus of the picture is displaced, indeed often diverted by the cartouches that provide only the most superficial information. Until foreground and background are joined together in the observer the full narrative of the events remains inaccessible. In fact, the picture's full account comes from outside of it, from contemporary events, and implies the necessity of an informed viewer for more complete understanding. They are essentially ironical since they require careful contemplation to call the viewer's attention to the contradiction between what is ostensibly being narrated in the foreground and what is happening in the background. There is a clear tension between order and disorder in the portrayal of the events. At first, cued by the foreground images and the narrative medallions, viewers think they understand what is happening; but on second inspection they see that the overall scene is fraught with contradiction. Not just sight then but discernment is crucial to the paintings' full appreciation. The character of the conflict, its repressive and broad civil nature, is only revealed when we turn to the margins or the depths and see things like Morisco women hurling themselves from cliffs, preferring suicide to prolonged extinction in an alien land. These figures have no apparent reason for existing other than to address a more complete version of the historical events; to be seen and portray the conflict and

resistance of the community to the Crown's policies. Our complacency as spectators of panoramic, corographic canvases is disrupted by the tiny arresting images we can barely discern. On careful inspection of the multitude of minuscule figures, we discover what actually transpires there and begin to experience a discomfort as our scrutiny progresses. Suddenly, the lofty acts expected of the king's army are cast against a backdrop of self-destruction, cruelty, repression, armed advantage, steely discipline, technological superiority, and the criminal acts of war. Despite their obligation to portray the official version of the expulsion as per their commission, the artists repeatedly display sensitivity, empathy, and even partisanship in their rendering of the Moriscos' struggle against their exile and the suppression of their freedoms. They were, after all, also citizens of Spain, but especially of the Kingdom of Valencia, compatriots of the painters who like many in the kingdom expressed opposition to the Morisco's surrender of their identities and citizenship. In this way, the scrutiny of the images discloses a difference between what is revealed in a mere glance—a panorama of multitude of actions---, and examining the minute details, features that belie surface appearances and force larger recognition and understanding. Amidst a plethora of specificity, the pictures challenge us to look more closely and understand the brutal nature of the conflict. The primary subject of the Expulsion--the forced removal of the Moriscos from Spain by the king's military and administrative apparatus--is set into relief, then, by a series of contrasting small images, which remain pictorially secondary but denotatively primary because of the irony and clear contradiction they pose to the main action.

In this way, though minor in size, and often skewed away from the centers and vanishing points of the pictures, the miniature figures remain central to the full understanding of the painted scenes.

The paintings' were envisioned to portray the military victory and administrative efficiency of a militant Imperial Spain. With the benefit of historical hindsight, however, it is clear that the canvases concede the moral victory to the Moriscos. In their contradictions, these compositions are frankly transgressive as the events portrayed in the backgrounds usurp the space usually reserved in corography for the affirmation of the passage of time and the scenes of daily life. We see in them the dramatization of the problem of what was claimed to be a just war against a perceived domestic enemy, and the awkward way war and aggression against one's own people may play into the unity of the nation and its aspirations of empire. Two distinct facets of Spain battle against each other in them--a multicultural, multiconfessional Spain waging its own righteous resistance in defense of the last bastions of its existence next to the onslaught of an imperial Spain that fights a less easily justifiable struggle against its own citizens, while failing to recall the need to combine strength and probity with clemency and tolerance in dealing with all people. In this way, the images pose the question whether any state, contemporary or early modern, however upright its motivations or able its generals, can endure if its actions are not honorable and fair, and serve as an admonition to more observant viewers of this reality. When closely examined, it is evident that in the paintings of the Expulsion the artists joined their vision of

events to a prominent minority of resisters including scholars like Pedro de Valencia, who from the latter half of the sixteenth century on had condemned the repressive policies of the state not just beyond its immediate borders--that is in Flanders and America--as tragic errors leading not to the preservation of empire but to its inevitable ruin. Seen in the context of this larger debate the canvases acquire shadings that are not immediately visible today in the offices of a savings bank. The Duke of Lerma, as a capable general who thought it far better to preserve by ethnic war in the name of God and king a nation that was impoverished and even ruined, than, without the war save it, in his mind, for the benefit of Muslims and heretics. The ironic juxtaposition of the images no doubt provided much bitter reflection for Philip III's loyal dissidents. Cervantes, for one, would write about the conflict in painfully anguished and ambivalent terms, appreciating how both sides were devastatingly entangled in a clash of religious and political motives. The strife between Moriscos and the king's regiments provides a classic, emblematic narrative which serves as a vehicle for thoughtful meditation on the trajectory, legitimacy, power, burden, and mistakes of empire. If the painters' purpose had been solely to capture visually and chronicle the glory of the Expulsion, a testament to a fading Imperial Spain, the detailed narrative of the Moriscos' example of resistance to aggression would not have been appropriate to include in the pictures. These are no simple exaltations of the righteous actions by the state. Rather they represent a Spain that had finally reached the depths of a troubled domestic religious and cultural conflict, one that had arrived at the final collapse of its ancient social



institutions and ways of life. The canvases thus comprise a complex interweaving of multiple themes and preoccupations, many of them contradictory: prudence vs. daring, sophistication vs. simplicity, human enterprise vs. fortune, a community's rights vs. the demands of the state. It is to that complexity and tension that the paintings, when closely viewed, owe their compelling power and acquire their relevance to similar conflicts in the modern world. They capture a double perspective on Spanish history at a single moment in time: one that refuses to paint events in simple terms of black and white, and another that views them as a process laden with unending suffering and contradiction.