

**The Art of Conversation:
Eighteenth-Century Mexican Casta Painting**Mey-Yen Moriuchi

Abstract:

Traditionally, casta paintings have been interpreted as an isolated colonial Mexican art form and examined within the social historical moment in which they emerged. Casta paintings visually represented the miscegenation of the Spanish, Indian and Black African populations that constituted the new world and embraced a diverse terminology to demarcate the land's mixed races. Racial mixing challenged established social and racial categories, and casta paintings sought to stabilize issues of race, gender and social status that were present in colonial Mexico.

Concurrently, halfway across the world, another country's artists were striving to find the visual vocabulary to represent its families, socio-economic class and genealogical lineage. I am referring to England and its eighteenth-century conversation pictures. Like casta paintings, English conversation pieces articulate beliefs about social and familial propriety. It is through the family unit and the presence of a child that a genealogical statement is made and an effigy is preserved for subsequent generations. Utilizing both invention and mimesis, artists of both genres emphasize costume and accessories in order to cater to particular stereotypes.

I read casta paintings as conversations like their European counterparts—both internal conversations among the figures within the frame, and external ones between the figures, the artist and the beholder. It is my position that both casta paintings and conversation pieces demonstrate a similar concern with the construction of a particular self-image in the midst of societies that were apprehensive about the varying conflicting notions of socio-familial and socio-racial categories.

Keywords

casta, conversation piece, genre, identity

Spaniard. Indian. Mestizo. Black. Mulatto. Lobo. Chino. Albino. Throwback. These were just a few of the terms used to identify the mixed races that existed in colonial New Spain, present-day Mexico. During the eighteenth century, while Mexico was still under Spanish rule, a new genre of painting developed in New Spain that differentiated itself from the religious images and the secular portraits that prevailed at this time. This new genre, known as *cuadros de casta* or casta paintings, visually represented the miscegenation of the Spanish, Indian and Black African populations that constituted the New World and embraced the above terminology to demarcate the land's mixed races.

In this essay, I will be making an unlikely comparison that has not been proposed before, one which points to the numerous affinities shared between Mexican casta paintings and English conversation pieces, a genre of informal group and family portraiture that was developing concurrently in England in the eighteenth century.¹ Although documentary evidence that would prove direct contact is elusive, it is highly probable that Mexican artists were aware of concurrent genres across the Atlantic, particularly ones which shared similar preoccupations with the construction of public identities.

I believe that in the eighteenth century a more global visual culture existed than has been realized, one which provided artists with ideas, forms, compositions, and styles to imitate and appropriate for their own. This is supported by the extensive copying seen through the guild system as well as by the fact that Mexican artists had direct access to European prints and paintings. This exchange between Europe and New Spain has been well-documented with respect to religious imagery and the vast importation of Flemish prints.² This interaction has been less explored with regards to secular works but I would posit that Mexican artists were exposed to European imagery that included both religious and secular subject matter. The best evidence for this can be found in the death inventory of the prolific eighteenth-century Mexican casta artist, Miguel Cabrera, who owned eight books of prints of various sizes. In

addition to the prints, Cabrera owned two paintings by the Flemish genre artist, David Teniers the Younger (1610-90), one containing a *juego de naipes*, or card-playing, scene.³ Card-playing scenes, an example of which will be discussed below, appeared frequently in *casta* paintings.

Racial mixing, or *mestizaje*, was prevalent in colonial Mexico given the small quantities of Spanish women who had immigrated there, and by the eighteenth century people of mixed blood, known as *castas*, became a recognizable racial group that disrupted the clear ethnic distinctions between Spaniards, Indians and Africans. A series of *casta* paintings typically comprises twelve to sixteen distinct canvases: each canvas represents a family group that consists of a woman and a man of different races and one to two of their children. Typically the first three to four panels portray mixes between Spaniards and Indians, the second group of three to four panels depict mixes between Spaniards and Africans and the last six to ten panels represent mixes between Indians and Africans. Occasionally, the last two to three scenes might incorporate images of “heathen,” or unconverted, Indians. The image is accompanied by a textual inscription that identifies the racial mix depicted and also consequently highlights the difficulty in visually representing what was not clearly representable. By adding text to clarify what is depicted, these images demonstrate that they catered to a literate elite who must have recognized the inherent irony in the paintings’ representations. In other words, *casta* paintings, which attempted to visually demonstrate the difference between various races and their progeny, was at best a futile effort. It would have been impossible to distinguish between second, third and fourth generations of Spaniards, Indians and Africans by skin color, costume and occupation alone. The *casta* images reproduced an idealized colonial racial hierarchy with the Spaniards, pure-blooded and white, dominating the social ladder, followed by Indians, considered worthy of conversion to Catholicism by the Spanish crown, and Africans, regarded as slaves, occupying one of the lowest positions in society. Unconverted races such as the “heathen” Indians took their place on the very bottom rung of the social ladder and were often depicted partially naked, and living outdoors, flanked by traditional weapons such as bows and arrows. Besides the accompanying inscription, the family groups’ social and racial status is additionally noted by clothing (European versus indigenous, silk versus cotton), social setting (parlour versus

kitchen, home versus marketplace), activity (playing a guitar versus rolling cigars, strolling in a garden versus selling food), and props (textiles versus fruits and vegetables, birds versus mules).

This unique genre seems to have taken form from a desire to control and make sense of an increasingly confusing society, coupled with a European fascination with the exotic and the eighteenth-century trend to classify.⁴ The proliferation of racial mixing caused the elite to defend its whiteness. Power and success in the New World depended to a significant degree on purity of blood. Creoles, those born in the Americas of Spanish ancestry, were struggling to maintain status in a society where the *peninsulares*, those born in Spain, were intentionally shutting them out of administrative and ecclesiastical posts. The authenticity of the “Spanishness” of creole blood was increasingly questioned. In addition, from the sixteenth century forward, Europe had an established tradition of visually documenting the people, flora and fauna of the countries it visited and conquered. This led to the proliferation of cabinets of curiosities in which an array of artifacts, plants, animals, minerals and visual representations of the exotic were displayed.

In eighteenth-century Mexico there was a confusion of racial lineages and consequential anxiety over the blurring of these categories. The creation of *casta* nomenclature and the resultant paintings of each caste seem to have been an attempt to figure out and make sense of this confusion in a systematic and imaginative way, and to stabilize and construct a coherent cultural identity. As Marjorie Garber argues, it is only when anchored stable categories exist that human beings can know who they are and understand their place in the world.⁵ When these categories are upset or threatened, anxiety sets in and panic ensues. The creation of the *casta* system in colonial Mexico seems to have been this eighteenth-century society’s attempt at counterbalancing this kind of apprehension.

Casta paintings can be confusing and perplexing, as they seem to respect miscegenation by dressing mixed-race people in rich, hybrid costumes and juxtaposing them with the beautiful natural resources of colonial Mexico, but at the same time they criticize racial mixing in their images of degenerate and sordid combinations of Africans and Indians. I believe that the portrayal of the family, and specifically of the child, is critical to the

images' reception and role in relaying the concept of miscegenation. A majority of the images in a casta series depict peaceful, intimate family interactions among racial groups in order to emphasize the value placed on family unity and on the belief that families reflected social order. Not irrelevant is the allusion to the divine Holy Family which represented the ideal family unit as a model to be emulated, as for example in José Joaquín Magón's *Mulato e india, engendran calpamulato* [Mulatto and Indian beget calpamulato], dated ca. 1770, to be discussed further below (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. José Joaquín Magón, 8. *Mulato e india, engendran calpamulato* [Mulatto and Indian beget calpamulato], ca.1770, oil on canvas, 115 x 141 cm. Museo Nacional de Antropología, Madrid.

Traditionally, casta paintings have been interpreted as an isolated colonial Mexican art form and examined within the social historical moment in which they emerged. Indeed, they are a novel genre that has no direct precedent in Europe. I agree with Ilona Katzew that established social and racial categories were being constantly challenged and uprooted and that casta paintings sought to visualize and stabilize anxieties of race, gender and social status that were present in colonial Mexico.⁶ Although I am interested in the social and historical context of casta images, I have sought to place these images within the larger spectrum of visual culture. Roland Barthes argues that it is in relation to other texts within a genre, rather than in relation to lived experience, that human beings make sense of certain occurrences.⁷ When one experiences a work of art for the first time, it is through associations and references to other artworks seen, and through one's own personal knowledge—cultural, historical and artistic—that one begins to make sense of the picture in front of one. I would posit that the same argument can be applied to the artists' experiences. In other words, eighteenth-century Mexican artists were producing images in relation to other artworks, other genres, seen in addition to lived experiences, and the creative imagination.⁸ It is within this framework of genre theory and in relation to other artistic genres, such as viceregal portraiture, Dutch genre paintings and English conversation pictures, the last being the topic of this essay, that I have sought to interpret casta paintings.

The two most obvious differences between Mexican casta paintings and English conversation pictures are their relationships to patronage and display. English conversation pieces depict known individuals of gentle and noble status and were often commissioned by the very subjects they portrayed. In addition, family groups are represented on a single canvas and these canvases were often displayed prominently within one's home in entryways and living rooms where visitors would see them. Conversely, there exists little documentation on the patronage of casta paintings, though some scholars have argued that due to the large number of casta paintings that have been located in Spain, they were created for export to provide elite Spaniards, such as Fernando de Alencastre Noroña y Silva, the Duke of Linares, Viceroy of New Spain (1711-16), a memento to take home to show the diverse types of human beings that existed during his viceroyalty.⁹ Others are known to have been commissioned by ecclesiastical authorities, such as the 1740s set by Luis Berruero, which was commissioned by the Archbishop of Puebla, Juan Francisco de Loaiza (1743-47),¹⁰ or a series by José Joaquín Magón that was brought to Toledo in 1772 by Archbishop Francisco Antonio Lorenzana.¹¹ But many have also been located in Mexico, so an equal demand must have existed locally. Not much is known about where they were hung, but due to the series' size it can be deduced that a large, publicly accessed room would have been likely; whether this was in one's home or in a cabinet of curiosities is uncertain. The second difference is that casta paintings do not represent known individuals; they portray types that are imagined and highly constructed.

Despite these differences, Mexican casta paintings and English conversation pictures do share numerous similarities, namely a common concern with the construction of a particular self-image in the midst of societies that were apprehensive about conflicting socio-familial and socio-racial categories. Like casta paintings, English conversation pieces articulate beliefs about social and familial propriety. It is through the family group and the presence of a child (or children) that a genealogical and often moralizing statement is made, and an effigy is preserved for succeeding generations. Utilizing invention and mimesis, artists of both genres emphasize costume and accessories in order to cater to particular stereotypes. In addition, both use body language and the gaze to unite their figures into an informal, "spontaneous" narrative.

Although they do not represent actual families, *casta* paintings do represent family units and demonstrate a likeness to group and family portraiture. The family portrait originates from some conception of why a family unit is important. As Diane Owen Hughes states in her study of Italian family portraits, “the composition of family scenes seems clearly to respond to and reflect changing ideals and realities of family life in the West, which can be ‘read’ in a work of art.”¹² Although one needs to be cautious in using family portraits to make sweeping generalizations about family beliefs, their development does imply an inherent value in the family group. In addition, they express something about the relationship of family members to each other.

Conversation pictures were a visual means of expressing social and familial propriety and, through the means of invention and mimesis, represented the family’s wealth and social status. The term “conversation,” derived from the Latin word *conversatio*, was defined in the seventeenth-century as a gathering of acquaintances for social discourse. Also used to describe Dutch and Flemish art in the seventeenth-century, the term described paintings of informal groups, though not necessarily portraits of known people.¹³ The term continued to be used to describe paintings of imaginary clusters of people and genre scenes, rather than portraits of specific individuals, up until the 1760s. After this time, the term became associated more and more with informal group portraits of known individuals, and its usage became more strict and exclusive.¹⁴

Eighteenth-century English conversation pieces were informal group and family portraits often set in domestic interiors or garden settings. In this conversation piece by Arthur Devis, titled *Francis Vincent, His Wife Mercy and Daughter Ann, of Weddington Hall, Warwickshire*, the wife is seated on a bench outdoors in the countryside with her daughter standing beside her (Fig. 2).

The little girl, dressed in a pink gown similar in style to her mother’s, gestures towards her father, who approaches the family in mid-stride with a letter in his right hand, its contents today unknown. The wife, dressed elegantly in blue, is the only figure to break the intimacy of the scene by gazing towards the viewer. The fashionable blue dress with lace sleeves and ruched trimmings, as well as Francis Vincent’s red and green hussar’s



Figure 2. Arthur Devis, Francis Vincent, His Wife Mercy and Daughter Ann, of Weddington Hall, Warwickshire, 1763, oil on canvas, 106.7 x 99 cm. Copyright of the Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston.

costume, seem to be prop costumes, possibly owned by Devis himself and used repeatedly to clothe his figures in their portraits. Similarly, the landscape does not specifically reflect the actual countryside surrounding the former Weddington Hall and is found with slight variations in other works by Devis.¹⁵ This conversation piece's highly constructed nature bears a resemblance to *casta* images that equally fabricated costume and setting to denote the particular social status of the figures.

The aim of eighteenth-century English conversation pieces that depicted informal family groups was often to express the continuation of bloodlines, for both royalty and gentry alike.¹⁶ The early portraits of parents and children highlighted the role of children in carrying on the family line and therefore emphasized the dynastic nature of the parent-child relationship. Shearer West argues that some family conversation pictures “were not simply casual views of family life, but carefully constructed images of harmony which reveal attitudes about family lineage among the middle and upper classes in the first half of the eighteenth-century.”¹⁷ West points out that family continuity in England was threatened by a decrease in the number of living adult males. Difficulty in finding male heirs led to estates being passed down through female heirs as in Arthur Devis' *Robert Gwilym of Atherton and his Family*, 1745-47 (Yale Center for British Art) whose patriarch acquired the estate through the family of his wife, Elizabeth.¹⁸

Even though conversation pictures were acknowledged to be a mixture of authenticity and invention, Marcia Pointon argues that conversation pictures could be understood as a “visualization of the last will and testament.”¹⁹ They were constructions of genealogical narratives in which messages for future generations could be implied, and like *casta* paintings, demonstrated a concern for stabilizing social status and wealth. In William Hogarth's *The Cholmondeley Family*, 1732 (Private



Figure 3. William Hogarth, The Cholmondeley Family, 1732, oil on canvas, 71 x 90.8 cm. Private collection.

collection) the family is placed in a library that is divided from a living room by a bookcase (Fig. 3).

The father, George Cholmondeley, Viscount Malpas, is seated next to his wife and child. To the father's left is his brother, who leans on the back of a chair and looks over towards the living room, though he does not seem to be fazed by the Viscount's sons' rambunctious behavior in the adjoining room. The boys romp around in the living room, one precariously

standing on top of a chair and about to push a stack of books off a stool. The wife, having died the previous year, was painted posthumously, and is holding the youngest child as if presenting her to the public as she gazes directly out at the viewer. Her presence serves as a sort of a memorial, as well as a reminder

that these children, the future heirs to the Cholmondeley fortune, will be raised without a mother, and their father and uncle will be responsible for their upbringing. Similarly, in Johann Zoffany's *Group Portrait of John, 14th Lord of Willoughby de Broke and his Family in the Breakfast Room at Compton Verney*, the inclusion and triangular placement of the couple's three children anchor the composition and demonstrate their importance to the future of this family, while the lush interior setting, denoted by the oriental silk carpet, the porcelain service and silver decanter, silently gesture towards the family's wealth and noble status. (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. Johann Zoffany, John, Fourteenth Lord Willoughby de Broke, and his Family, ca.1766, oil on canvas, 101.9 x 127.3 cm. The J.Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.

Although a majority of conversation pictures were produced by English artists working in the eighteenth century, their impact was not contained within English borders. While Spain, for the most part, did not participate often in this genre, the informal structure and narrative quality of English conversation pictures can be seen, as Janis Tomlinson argues,



Figure 5. Francisco Goya y Lucientes, Family of the Infante Don Luis, 1784, oil on canvas, 248 x 330 cm. Fondazione Magnani-Rocca, Parma, Corta di Mamiano, Italy. Courtesy of Scala / Art Resource, NY.

in Francisco Goya's *Family of the Infante Don Luis*, 1784 (Fig.5).²⁰ In this large, ambitious painting, the Infante's wife Maria Teresa is seated at a table in a dressing gown with her long hair undone, surrounded by various members of the royal family, servants, and even the artist himself. Its informal, genre-like quality draws on Velázquez' *Las Meninas*, 1656 (Museo del Prado, Madrid) and precedes Goya's more formal family portrait, *Charles IV of Spain and His Family*, 1800 (Museo del Prado, Madrid), in which the artist also includes a self-portrait of himself at work.

In addition to Goya, the Venetian artist, Jacopo Amigoni, who was active in numerous countries including Italy, Germany and England prior to settling in Spain, where he was appointed *primer pintor de cámara* to Ferdinand VI in 1747, produced many portraits, including conversation pieces such as *Horatio Walpole and his Family*, ca. 1730 (Wolterton Hall, Norfolk), a group portrait in which the Walpole family is placed in a grand interior setting. The patriarch is seated at a desk on the left while his wife and eight children are spread out towards the right of the picture frame, all placed frontally, looking out towards the viewer, producing a stiff, serene group portrait.



Figure 6. Jacopo Amigoni, *The Infanta María Antonia Fernanda, hija de Felipe V*, ca. 1750, oil on canvas, 103 x 84 cm. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Figure 7. Miguel Cabrera, *Doña María de la Luz Padilla y Cervantes*, ca. 1760, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 83.8 cm. Brooklyn Museum of Art.

Jacopo Amigoni's transnational status is important to consider in relation to the artists of the New World. Marcus Burke has argued that viceregal female portraits by Miguel Cabrera in Mexico strongly resemble the portraits of Amigoni.²¹ Amigoni was well known for his portraiture at the Spanish court and images such as *The Infanta María Antonia Fernanda, hija de Felipe V*, ca. 1750, share many affinities with the oeuvre of Mexican painters such as Cabrera, who painted portraiture and religious images, as well as casta paintings (Fig. 6). Amigoni used cool, porcelain colors in a rococo style that produced seductive, statue-like figures. The elite portraits by Cabrera like *Doña María de la Luz Padilla y Cervantes*, ca. 1760, and *Mariscala de Castilla, María Manuel de Medina y Torres*, ca. 1760, (Private collection) feature a similar pose, hairstyle, costume, and gaze as Amigoni's sitter (Fig. 7). Though Cabrera avoids the ornate rococo embellishment, such as the naked putti, adorning Amigoni's female subject, in favor of a more reserved, serene style, he shares Amigoni's emphasis on presenting his female sitters as idealized, statuesque and noble. It is not inconceivable that Amigoni's portraiture and conversation pieces traversed the Atlantic either in the form of paintings or engravings, as Amigoni was also interested in prints and produced graphic copies of his work.²² The popularity of rococo tastes and fashions contributed to eighteenth-century global visual culture, and another reason for the affinities between English conversation pieces and Mexican casta paintings may be their mutual awareness and emulation of French

culture and court fashion during this time period.

Although casta paintings are not portraits of real individuals, I believe casta images can be interpreted as conversation pieces. English conversation pictures emphasized the family unit and utilized the child to send a genealogical statement, while casta paintings utilized the family, and specifically the child, to represent racial mixing. Thus the dynastic legacy was significant for both, although for casta images the end goal was not to designate the child as the recipient of wealth and property, but rather as receiver and propagator of specific racial attributes. In addition to the attention to the family and child, British conversation pieces and Mexican casta paintings incorporate invention and mimesis in a spontaneous, informal way. They both place interacting family members in detailed settings, with an emphasis on costume and accessories. Domestic scenes of informal, familial interaction can also be seen in many casta series by artists such as Juan Rodríguez Juárez, Miguel Cabrera, José de Páez, José Joaquín Magón and Andrés de Islas, among others.

Images such as José Joaquín Magón's *Mulato e india, engendran calpamulato* [Mulatto and Indian beget calpamulato], ca. 1770, evoke a harmonious domestic scene of a family at leisure (Fig. 1). Here the father, mother and child are seated at a small wooden table playing cards by candlelight. The only light source in the image is that emanating from the single burning candle at the center of the table. This spiritual element would not have been lost on the contemporary viewer, conjuring up as it does images of the Holy Family. On the table, the cards and candle are accompanied by a trio of bananas, a locally produced fruit, as well as a trio of pink flowers held by the small child. The candlelight illuminates the face of the mother who, dressed simply in a white cotton blouse and coral necklace, is looking down at her cards. The father, dressed in a red coat with blue breeches, is about to lay down one of his cards. Their daughter sweetly leans on the table gazing intently at her parents. The simplicity of the setting and the figures' clothing, as well as the darker color of the family's skin tone, imply a family of lesser means, and in case we were unsure of their exact caste we are given a textual inscription for clarification in the upper left hand corner.



Figure 8. Andrés de Islas, No. 3. *De castizo y española, nace español* [From *Castizo and Spaniard, a Spaniard is born*], 1774, oil on canvas, 75 x 54 cm. Museo de América, Madrid.

In Andrés de Islas' *De castizo y española nace español* [From *Castizo and Spaniard, a Spaniard is born*], we are confronted with a family of higher social status (Fig. 8). This is easily deduced from the European costume of the individuals, the high-back leather chairs, and the musical activity that occupies this small family. Here, the castizo father, offspring of Spanish and mestizo parents, is seated playing the violin, his left leg crossed over his right. He is dressed in European fashion, consisting of a blue frock coat and breeches and red waistcoat, and wears a short powdered wig. To his right, his "Spanish" son is seated on his mother's lap in a complementary, miniature version of his father's outfit. This image visually reflects the belief at the time that by continually mixing Spanish blood with indigenous blood, one could 'correct' the blood of future generations, a process known as blood mending. The son is disproportionately large and is awkwardly seated on his mother's legs as he reaches playfully towards his father's bow. The Spanish mother is

dressed in an elegant, white Mantua-style dress. Her panier is stiff and keeps her upper body rigid, while her sleeves are edged with Flemish lace. De Islas has given her all the attributes of a Spanish lady, sporting the accoutrements of her class, from the pearl choker and earrings to the *chiqueador*, or beauty spot, on her left temple and the fan in her right hand. An oversized, draped curtain forms the backdrop of their interior setting, an oddity in *casta* paintings but typical of upper-class portraiture. We are drawn into the picture by the mother's direct gaze and are given a hint at an exterior through the door behind the mother, although any details are negated due to its peripheral location and the blurring of forms. De Islas seems to mix traditions from various genres, including viceregal portraiture, as evidenced by the close approximation of this Spanish mother with his female court portraits, like *Ana María de la Campa y*

Cos y Ceballos, 1776 (Rodrigo Rivero-Lake, Antigüedades, Mexico D.F).

In this aspect, perhaps conversation pictures and casta paintings are not so different. It is true the figures in casta images do not have actual names that establish their ancestral lineage but they do portray identities—identities of idealized, typified people of mixed races in eighteenth-century Mexico. Individual and group portraiture have been said to be the result of humankind's desire to perpetuate one's memory and preserve one's effigy for succeeding generations. Artists who produced casta images did not visually represent actual individuals, but by painting fictitious characters of various racial mixes, they not only attempted to make sense of the rapid proliferation of mixed races, but also preserve these types for posterity.

Artists who painted casta images used external attributes to convey identity, such as dress, accessories, deportment, bodily pose and setting. Identification in conversation pieces, as well as in casta paintings, is often not achieved by detailed expressive facial features, but rather by items and accessories that allow the viewer to recognize the individuals' place in society. Through clothing, hairstyles or coats of arms, the viewer decides whether they are looking at a cacique, mestizo, criollo or Spaniard. The manipulation of the image is intentional. Portraits are idealized, typified representations of the sitter. Casta images are also idealized, typified representations, but of the anonymous. Harry Berger argues that within portraiture the pose itself and the act of posing is contrived. His theory focuses on the representation of the act of portrayal and stipulates that "the act of portrayal represented by the image is a fiction", an argument equally applicable to conversation pictures as well as casta paintings.²³ In this way I believe these two seemingly disparate artistic expressions are similar, for in both, imagination and improvisation take precedence over actuality and likeness.



Figure 9. Andrés de Islas, No. 1. De español e india, nace mestizo [From Spaniard and Indian, a mestizo is born], 1774, oil on canvas, 75 x 54 cm. Museo de América, Madrid.

In another image from Andrés de Islas' 1774 casta series, *De español e india, nace mestizo* [From Spaniard and Indian, a mestizo is born], we are this time confronted with an exterior scene, indicated by the trees and countryside in the background (Fig. 9). The elegant Indian mother is dressed in a beautiful hybrid dress; its white fitted bodice and blouse is edged with Flemish lace cuffs while her full red skirt denotes a geometric, indigenous pattern at its trim. Over her blouse and skirt, the mother wears a transparent, embroidered tulle rebozo, which covers her torso and shoulders. On her head she wears a folded headkerchief that ends at her neck which she holds onto with her right hand while her left hand soothes her tired son. Her jewelry consists of a pearl choker and dangling pearl earrings. Her costume resembles that of Miguel Cabrera's striking Indian mother in the first panel of his 1763 series of the same title. Working within a guild system, Mexican artists frequently copied one another, and several compositions, forms, and

themes were repeated among various identified and anonymous artists, establishing basic conventions foundational to any genre. The Spanish father is dressed handsomely in white in the latest European fashions. He looks downwards towards his son, who looks like a smaller version of himself. The little boy rubs his left eye, either wiping away a remnant of a tear or indicating he is ready for a nap. The two are identically dressed in white surcoats, vests, breeches and hose. In a majority of casta images of the upper classes, children are dressed in miniature versions of adult clothing. Although by this time children of wealthy elites in Europe were dressing in children's clothes, casta paintings reflect the pervasive trend in Mexico of dressing children in adult costume. I read this as an attempt to hang onto an imaginary past, as in the persistent use of cartouches and coats of arms in eighteenth-century viceregal portraiture. In addition, dressing children in miniature versions of adult fashions

reflects a society of conspicuous consumption, one that had the means to emphasize the status rather than the utility of such clothing.

Magón and de Islas play close attention to costume and interior decoration, revealing the presence of foreign and domestic products alike in order to reflect the desired social and racial status of the individuals depicted. The representation of the imagined family placed value on the family unit itself and foregrounded religious beliefs about the family's role in social order. The presence of the child as symbol of a racial and social union demonstrated the significance of birthright and family legacy. I read these casta images as reflecting the informal and narrative qualities of conversation pieces in which the family and child are depicted to send a moralizing and genealogical statement, in this case one which propagates a message about racial mixing.

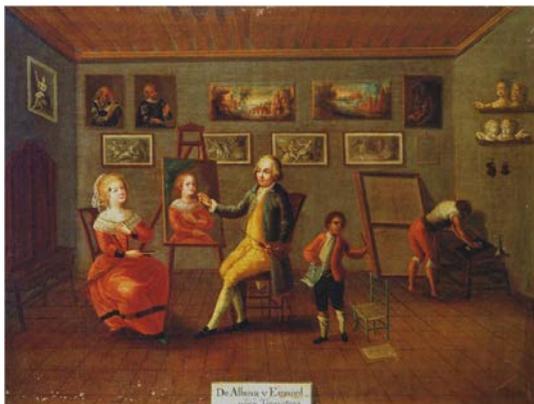


Figure 10. Unknown artist (Mexican), *De albina y español, nace torna atrás* [From *Albino and Spaniard, a throw-back is born*], ca. 1785-90, oil on canvas, 62.6 x 83.2 cm. Private collection.

In the casta painting, *De albina y español, nace torna atrás* [From *Albino and Spaniard, a throw-back is born*], we are faced with the work of an anonymous Mexican artist, one who was also clearly aware of distinct artistic forms—genre and portraiture (Fig. 10). He conflates the two into one and provides us a glimpse into an unusual setting, the artist's studio. The scene shows the father, dressed as an elite Spaniard, painting his albino wife, a mixture of Spanish and morisca parents. She is seated, posing, wearing a red dress and lace mantilla and holding the requisite fan in her right hand. While she looks toward her husband/artist, her

portrait image, shown freshly painted on the easel, stares directly out at the viewer, following traditional viceregal portrait conventions. The painted wife is the one who captures our attention with her gaze. Their dark-skinned, throwback son also looks out at the beholder as he gestures with the brush in his left hand. The servant in the background grinds colors. The back wall of the father's studio displays a variety of landscapes, portraits and engravings, the latter visual testimony to the availability of engravings and prints to Mexican artists. This

woman—mother, albino and sitter—is the subject of a separate portrait within a casta painting. The artist has creatively collapsed genre and portraiture into one and further blurs the boundaries between subject and object, nature and artifice, reality and representation.

With casta paintings, artists had more freedom of expression compared with the strict rules governing the production of religious images in Mexico. It is likely that artists were more aware of the global visual culture, Mexican and European, which surrounded them than we have realized. Eighteenth-century Mexican artists were producing images in relation to other artworks, other genres they had seen, and in relation to lived experiences and the creative mind. I believe casta paintings can be read as conversations, both as internal ones among the figures within the picture frame and as external ones between the figures, artist, and beholder. By representing intimate, “spontaneous” familial moments in a structured, yet informal, colloquial way, artists who painted casta images communicated an imaginary moral ideology for Mexico. Complicated and controversial issues of race, gender and social status are as relevant in our current globalized world as in eighteenth-century Mexico, and as a result, casta paintings continue to provoke, engage, perplex and converse with their twenty-first century audiences.

Mey-Yen Moriuchi recently received her Ph.D. in History of Art from Bryn Mawr College. She is a recipient of the Whiting Fellowship in the Humanities and has presented her research on 18th- and 19th-century Mexican painting at various institutions, such as the Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art, the National Gallery of Art and the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She teaches art history at Drexel University and Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia.

Endnotes

¹ Ilona Katzew mentions in passing that Miguel Cabrera's scenes that emphasize the physical contact between the figures recall the popular European conversation pieces that represent family groups, although she does not elaborate or analyze this connection. Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004), 95.

² For a more detailed discussion of the significance of Flemish prints on religious viceregal paintings, see José de Mesa, "The Flemish Influence in Andean Art," in *America: Bride of the Sun* (Antwerp, Royal Museum of Fine Arts, 1992), 179-188; Marcus B. Burke. *Spain and New Spain: Mexican Colonial Arts in Their European Context* (Corpus Christi, TX: Art Museum of South Texas, 1979), 30-36; FilipVermeyleen, "Exporting Art Across the Globe: The Antwerp Art Market in the Sixteenth-Century," in *Netherlands Yearbook for History of Art 1999, Volume 50. Art for the Market 1500-1700*, ed. Reindert Falkenburg et al. (Netherlands: Waanders Uitgevers, Zvolle, 1999), 19.; Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, *Pintura y Escultura en Nueva España (1557-1640)* (Mexico: Grupo Azabache, 1992),191-198; Pál Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1951).

³ Cabrera's death inventory is presented in Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, *Miguel Cabrera: Pinto de Cámara de la Reina Celestial* (Mexico: InverMexico Grupo Financiero, 1995), 269-294. Cabrera's possession of a painting by David Teniers the Younger (though not the subject matter) is also noted in Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 95-106.

⁴ For more on the origin of casta paintings, see Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting*, chapter 3; Magali Carrera, *Imagining Identity in New Spain: Race, Lineage, and the Colonial Body in Portraiture and Casta Paintings* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2003); María Concepción García Sáiz, *The Castes: A Genre of Mexican Painting* (Milan: Olivetti, 1989).

⁵ See Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992) and *Symptoms of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting*.

⁷ Barthes concept of genre is elaborated in works such as Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers. (London: Jonathan Cape Ltd. 1957) and *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1974).

⁸ See Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre." trans. Avital Ronell. *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 7, No. 1, On Narrative (Autumn, 1980) and Tzvetan Todorov, "The Origin of Genres." in *Modern Genre Theory*, ed. David Duff (United Kingdom: Pearson Education Limited, 2000).

⁹ The Duke of Linares is believed to have commissioned a set by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, who painted a large portrait of the Duke ca. 1711-1716 which is now located in the Museo Nacional de Historia in Mexico City. See Efraín Castro Morales, "Los Cuadros de Castas de la Nueva España." *Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerika*. (Vol. 20. 1983), 681.

¹⁰ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 37; Efraín Castro Morales, "Los Cuadros de Castas de la Nueva España.", 681.

¹¹ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 155. Also mentioned in María Concepción García Sáiz, *The Castes*, 90-92, though García Sáiz refers to Lorenzana as a Cardinal, while Ilona Katzew identifies him as an Archbishop.

¹² Diane Owen-Hughes, "Representing the Family: Portraits and Purposes in Early Modern Italy" in *Art and History: Images and Their Meaning*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 9. Also see the following essays on representations of families in the Netherlands and England: David R. Smith, *Masks of Wedlock: Seventeenth-Century Dutch Marriage Portraiture* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1982); Shearer West, "The Public Nature of Private Life; The Conversation Piece and the Fragmented Family," *The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* (18:2 1995), 153-72.

¹³ See Marjorie E. Wieseman, "The Art of "Conversatie": Genre Portraiture in the Southern Netherlands in the Seventeenth Century" in *The Age of Rubens*, ed. Peter C. Sutton (Boston, MA: Museum of Fine Arts, 1994). (Exh.Cat.) 182-193.

¹⁴ This is the definition used by Mario Praz in *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America*. (University Park and London: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971).

¹⁵ Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston. *Polite Society by Arthur Devis 1712-1787- Portraits of the English Country Gentleman and his Family*. (United Kingdom, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston, 1983), 64.

¹⁶ See Shearer West, "The Public Nature of Private Life; The Conversation Piece and the Fragmented Family," 153-72; Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), chapter VI; Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces*, 1971.

¹⁷ Shearer West, "The Public Nature of Private Life; The Conversation Piece and the Fragmented Family," 158.

¹⁸ Ellen G D'Oench, *The Conversation Piece: Arthur Devis and His Contemporaries*. (New Haven, CT: Yale Center for British Art, 1980), 50-51.

¹⁹ Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 161.

²⁰ Janis Tomlinson, *Francisco Goya y Lucientes: 1746-1828* (London: Phaidon Press, 1994), 63.

²¹ Linda Bantel and Marcus B. Burke, *Spain and New Spain: Mexican Colonial Arts in Their European Context* (Corpus Christi, TX: Art Museum of South Texas, 1979), 43.

²² Amigoni was interested in prints and produced engravings after his works. See Elaine Claye, "A Group of Portrait Drawings by Amigoni" *Master Drawings*, Vol. 12, No. 1, (Spring 1974), 41-101; Tancred Borenius, "A Portrait by Jacopo Amigoni." *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Vol. 74, No. 430. (Jan., 1939), 39.

²³ See Harry Berger Jr., "Fictions of the Pose: Facing the Gaze of Early Modern Portraiture" *Representations*, No. 46 (Spring, 1994), 90.

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