



Figure 1. Luis de Mena, “Castas,” ca. 1750. Oil on canvas, 119 x 103 cm. Used by permission from the Collection of the Museo de América, Madrid (inventory number 00026).

Guadalupe and the Castas: The Power of a Singular Colonial Mexican Painting

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A mid-eighteenth-century casta painting by Luis de Mena uniquely unites the image of the Virgin of Guadalupe and casta (mixed-race) groupings, along with scenes of everyday life in Mexico, and the natural abundance of New Spain. Reproduced multiple times, the painting has not been systematically analyzed. This article explores individual elements in their colonial context and the potential meanings of the painting in the modern era.

Una pintura de Luis de Mena sobre las castas, de mediados del siglo XVIII, reúne de manera singular la imagen de la Virgen de Guadalupe, los agrupamientos de castas y escenas de la vida cotidiana en México, junto con la abundancia natural de Nueva España. Aunque reproducida en múltiples ocasiones, la pintura no ha sido analizada sistemáticamente. Este artículo explora sus elementos individuales en el contexto colonial y los significados potenciales de la pintura en la época moderna.

Key words: casta paintings, colonial botany, New Spain, race mixture, Virgin of Guadalupe.

Palabras clave: botánica colonial, Nueva España, mezcla de razas, pinturas de castas, Virgen de Guadalupe.

As visitors enter the main gallery of Madrid's Museo de América, they see an eighteenth-century painting showing the colonial Mexican

*My thanks go to the generous colleagues who have commented on drafts of this article: Ida Altman, Patrick Grant, Anita Guerrini, Ann Kelly, and Jeffrey Burton Russell, and two readers for *MS/EM*. My thanks also go to the Interdisciplinary Humanities Center and the Academic Senate, University of California, Santa Barbara for research funds in support of this project. All errors are my responsibility.

Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos Vol. 31, Issue 2, Summer 2015, pages 218–247. ISSN 0742-9797, electronic ISSN 1533-8320. ©2015 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprint.info.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/msem.2015.31.2.218.

system of racial hierarchy and the Virgin of Guadalupe, as well as scenes of everyday life in Mexico, and an array of fruits of the colony (see fig. 1). Not surprisingly, the museum has made a nearly full-size color poster of this striking work, with its label emphasizing it as a *casta* painting. Starting in 1989, it has been reproduced in color and black and white in many publications.¹ The painting is relatively small and signed by one Luis de Mena.² Created around 1750, a key moment of transition in the colony's history, it is a portal to understanding an immensely complex colonial society in the midst of significant cultural change. It was a unique creation in Mexican colonial art, uniting two distinct subjects that had never before—or since—appeared together on the same canvas: the Dark Virgin of Mexico (*la Virgen Morena*) and secular groupings of mixed-race (*casta*) families. Separately the Virgin of Guadalupe and *casta* families were the subjects of many, many paintings, collected by Peninsular and American-born Spaniards alike, but only Mena's places the two in the same composition. Why has this particular painting become a modern icon for *casta* paintings as a genre? Despite the image's increased appearance in many publications, it has never received the systematic analysis it warrants, although a number of scholars have paid more than cursory attention to it.³ The painting has many anomalies, which deepen the central mystery about its meaning—or meanings.

The painting has a series of compartments with self-contained scenes, many that are unique.⁴ Mena's composition has three distinct horizontal registers with multiple subjects on the single canvas. At the bottom are fruits of Mexico, identified by names; in the middle are two rows, each with four *casta* families in hierarchical order; and at the top are two miniature scenes of colonial life, with the central

1. Its first appearance is on the dust jacket and in set III, 66–67 of María Concepción García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas: un género pictórico americano* (Milan: Olivetti, 1989) and also, in at least ten other publications. See reproduction list at the end of the article.

2. The signature in the lower right hand corner is not visible in any reproduction, including the poster, so García Sáiz's identification is important, García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66.

3. María Elena Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions: Limpieza de Sangre, Religion, and Gender in Colonial Mexico* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 256; Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions and Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 172–174; Jeanette Favrot Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe: From Black Madonna to Queen of the Americas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 256–257.

4. Mena had used this method in 1746 for a painting in a church, García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66. It is also common for paintings of holy persons, including Guadalupe, to include narrative scenes in compartments.

image of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Guadalupe divides the two scenes of everyday life and she penetrates into the first row of casta images. The overall impact is far greater than the sum of its parts, making it a celebration of Mexico, its diverse population, its abundance of different fruits, and its own Virgin.

Mena's painting has idiosyncratic depictions of casta families. Casta paintings show race mixture in a formulaic, hierarchical manner (as conceived by whites⁵). These paintings of racial mixture and social hierarchy were produced in Mexico for only around one hundred years, from the beginning of the eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century.⁶ They are not only a record of the racial system created by elites, but also a vivid record of quotidian life in the late colonial period. They can be seen as "proud renditions of the local."⁷ A hallmark of this genre is its thoroughly secular character, a major break from painting of earlier eras that was dominated by religious subjects. Beginning in the run-up to the 1992 Columbus quinentennial, Mena's painting became an icon for the casta genre, when the genre itself became a locus of scholarship. From their earlier oblivion, casta paintings are now often used to illustrate daily life in colonial Spanish America, and are themselves the subject of considerable scholarly study.

How did Luis de Mena come to produce this iconic painting? Active as a painter, he is described by one historian as a mere "journeyman,"⁸ while another considers him "a completely unknown painter" and his style "mediocre,"⁹ with a meager output.¹⁰ At present,

5. In general, the category is "*españoles*" in the original although there is one set that does use the name "*blancos*" for Europeans. In the conquest era, Spaniards self-described as *cristianos*, not *españoles*. The legal system created in the sixteenth century was divided between the *república de españoles* and the *república de indios*. In that scheme, *españoles* referred to anyone who was not Indian, including *negros*, plus *mulatos*, *mestizos*, and other mixed-race *castas*.

6. As a genre it was virtually forgotten for nearly two centuries, likely due to Mexican cultural politics. When Mexico gained its independence in 1821, the legal racial hierarchy of the colonial era was repudiated and casta paintings ceased to be produced.

7. Ilona Katzew, "Casta Painting: Identity and Social Stratification in Colonial Mexico," in *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America*, ed. Ilona Katzew (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996), 22.

8. Norman Neuerberg, "La Madre Santísima de la Luz," *The Journal of San Diego History* 41, no. 2 (1995), n.p.

9. García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66; García Sáiz, "The Artistic Development of Casta Painting," in *New World Orders*, ed. Ilona Katzew (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996), 35.

10. There are five known works (including the one under discussion), García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66; Manuel Toussaint, *Pintura Colonial en México* (México: Impr. Universitaria, 1965), 193; Neuerberg, "La Madre Santísima."

we have no biographical data on Mena, which is unfortunate, since it might give clues to his artistic production. He did, however, sign his work, in an era when many painters did not, therefore flouting guild regulations concerning the signing of work.¹¹

When he painted this work, circa 1750, *casta* painting was well established as a genre of Mexican art. Spaniards in Mexico had long since added new racial terminology of *españoles*¹² (European whites), *negros* (Africans), and *indios* (Indians), which were legal categories in the colonial system. Joining those initial, essentialized and homogenized racial categories created by Spaniards were legal categories for mixtures of: whites and Indians—*mestizos*; and whites and Africans—*mulattos*; as well as an intermediate category, the mixture of *mestizos* and whites (i.e., three-quarters white)—*castizos*. As colonial society's fluidity increased in the eighteenth century and non-whites more easily entered the elite ranks, "Spanish families reacted by ridiculing successful *mestizos* and *mulattos* as Spanish 'wannabes' or imaginary whites."¹³ By the early eighteenth century, the formal *casta* system in Mexico City had broken down, with racial terminology in flux.¹⁴ Individuals manipulated their own racial classifications over time and attempted to raise the status of themselves and their offspring. For colonial elites, *casta* paintings might well have been an attempt to fix in place rigid divisions based on race, even as they were disappearing in social reality. Racial hierarchy was not a byproduct of the *casta* genre but its essential organizing principle.

Casta painting was (with the exception of Mena's work) a strictly secular genre. *Casta* family groupings were apparently not painted

11. Susan Deans-Smith, "'This Noble and Illustrious Art': Painters and the Politics of Guild Reform in Early Modern Mexico City, 1674–1768," in *Mexican Soundings*, eds. Susan Deans-Smith and Eric Van Young (London: Institute of the Americas, University of London, 2007), 85.

12. The distinction between "*criollos*" and "*peninsulares*" was not sharply drawn until the eighteenth century, although as early as the sixteenth century religious orders instituted the so-called *alternativa* for leadership positions, meaning the alternation between American-born and peninsular-born Spaniards. In the eighteenth century, the Bourbon reforms systematically excluded American-born Spaniards from holding office, with the exception of the *cabildos*; so much of the heated rhetoric about the hated *gachupines* comes from the later period.

13. Ida Altman, Sarah Cline, and Javier Pescador, *The Early History of Greater Mexico* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 278.

14. Dennis N. Valdés, "Decline of the *Sociedad de Castas* in Eighteenth-Century Mexico" (PhD diss. University of Michigan, 1978). See also R. Douglas Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebeian Society in Colonial Mexico City, 1660–1720* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994).

from models, but idealized creations of the artists,¹⁵ using the accepted categories of racial classification. In casta paintings the complete lack of religious iconography in the hundreds of examples is quite remarkable. Few casta paintings show a distant church, a religious picture as part of a domestic interior, or pieces of religious jewelry, such as crosses, rosaries, or wedding rings. There are also no overtly religious settings in any casta family groups, and thus there are no obvious or even implicit messages that mixed-race families “stayed together because they prayed together.” Unlike religious paintings that could only be produced by those passing an examination of the artists’ guild, artists producing secular paintings were not similarly examined; “the freedom to paint secular themes was probably a factor that contributed to the great number of casta paintings.”¹⁶

Chart 1. *Racial Categories in Mena’s “Castas” Painting.*

European + Indian

Panel 1. <i>Española</i> + <i>Indio</i> = <i>Mestizo</i>	Spanish woman, Indian man, Mestizo son
Panel 2. <i>Mestizo</i> + <i>Española</i> = <i>Castizo</i>	Mestizo man, Spanish woman, <i>Castizo</i> son
Panel 3. <i>Castizo</i> + <i>Español</i> = <i>Española</i>	<i>Castizo</i> woman, Spanish man, Spanish daughter

European + African

Panel 4. <i>Español</i> + <i>Negra</i> = <i>Mulato</i>	Spanish man, black woman, Mulatto son
Panel 5. <i>Mulato</i> + <i>Española</i> = <i>Morisca</i>	Mulatto man, Spanish woman, <i>Morisca</i> daughter
Panel 6. <i>Morisca</i> + <i>Español</i> = <i>Albino Torna-atrás</i>	<i>Morisca</i> woman, Spanish man, “ <i>Albino</i> throwback” son

Indian + Indian-mix

Panel 7. <i>Mestiza</i> + <i>Indio</i> = <i>Lobo</i>	Mestiza woman, Indian man, “Wolf”
Panel 8. <i>Lobo</i> + <i>India</i> = <i>Indio</i>	“Wolf,” Indian woman, Indian son

Indian + African – none

Asian + any other racial category – none

Mena followed the general conventions of the casta genre (see Chart 1), a systematic ordering of race mixture: father of one race; mother of another; and their child a mixture of the two, with each person’s racial category explicitly labeled. The child of that family becomes the starting point for the next family grouping in descending order. But the central mystery of Mena’s casta painting is its religious element, the Virgin of Guadalupe, so sharply at odds with the secular essence of the genre.

15. The casta families might be seen as a variation on the Holy Family (Mary, Joseph, and Jesus), but there is no direct nod to this as their inspiration, Joseph F. Chorpenning, ed. *The Holy Family as Prototype of the Civilization of Love: Images from the Viceroyal Americas* (Philadelphia: Saint Joseph’s Press, 1996).

16. Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 10.



Figure 1.1. Detail, Luis de Mena, "Castas." "Espanola y Yndio nase Mestizo [sic]."

I contend that Guadalupe is the key to understanding the work as a whole. Since religious works were painted explicitly to be symbolic and emblematic, uplifting to the faithful as well as didactic, all the elements of Mena's painting should be interpreted symbolically in relation to Guadalupe, and not simply as a collection of Mexican exotica. It is in the Virgin's relationship to the castas where her power is most apparent. But even so, Mena's depictions of many casta families are anomalous and need careful description to highlight those anomalies.

Mena begins his casta series with an image shocking for the era.¹⁷ It is a unique depiction of an elegant Spanish woman paired with an

17. In fact, most scholars who publish the Mena painting do not remark on this anomaly; exceptions are Elena Isabel Estrada de Gerlero, "The Representation of 'Heathen Indians' in Mexican Casta Painting," in *New World Orders*, 50; Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 256; and Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 258.

indigenous man. His nakedness is covered by a loincloth, his head crowned with a multicolor feather headdress, and he has bow and arrows in hand. He is a canonical Chichimeca, an *indio bárbaro*, the living image of an uncivilized "savage."¹⁸ Both the indigenous groups of central Mexico and Europeans considered the nomadic Chichimeca formidable foes: fierce, bellicose, and difficult to conquer, particularly after they acquired horses. Although contemporary texts describe these nomads in considerable detail, including their skill as warriors, colonial artists never show the *indios bárbaros* in warrior mode, mounted on horseback.¹⁹ Likely, Spaniards and Creoles,²⁰ seeking superiority in all spheres of power, never laid eyes on a living Chichimeca, and concocted images of weak, passive, and feminized *indios*.^{21,22}

Mena's painting is not unrealistic in its notion that Europeans had sexual connections with Indians, but it was generally Spanish men who had sexual relations with Indian women, ranging from holy matrimony, to long-term common-law unions, to fleeting consensual couplings, to rape.²³ Mena's highly unequal pairing of an elite Spanish woman and an *indio bárbaro* is not just unusual, it would have seemed frankly bizarre and offensive by eighteenth-century Creole elites, if taken literally.

Mena must have known the anomaly of his *española* and Chichimeca. Even foreign observers commented on the close attention that New Spain's elites paid to racial matters and describe their status anxieties. According to Alexander von Humboldt in *Political Essay*

18. Many casta sets depict such Indians as the last of sixteen family groups or entirely separately. They are variously labeled as "*indios bárbaros*," "*indios gentiles*," "*indios mecos bárbaros*," and "*indios mecos Apaches*."

19. Estrada de Gerlero, "The Representation of 'Heathen Indians,' in Mexican Casta Painting," 45.

20. "Mexican-born" or "American-born" Spaniards. *Criollo* was initially a term for non-African born *negros*.

21. Laura A. Lewis, "The 'weakness' of women and the feminization of the Indian," *Colonial Latin American Review* 5, no. 1 (1996).

22. See Raphael B. Folsom "Philip Wayne Powell, *The Cold War, and the Conquest of North Mexico*" in this issue of *MS/EM* for a discussion of representations of the Chichimeca.—Ed.

23. A few elite Aztec women made marriages with Spanish conquerors and high status settlers. Doña Marina (Malinche) is the most famous indigenous woman to have a natural child with a Spaniard, conqueror Hernán Cortés. Doña Marina married Spanish conqueror Juan Jaramillo, with whom she produced a legitimate heir, Doña María Jaramillo, Robert Himmerich y Valencia, *The Encomenderos of New Spain, 1521–1555* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 178.

on the Kingdom of New Spain, published in 1804, Creole elites were acutely conscious of and touchy about race:

In America the greater or lesser degree of whiteness of skin decides the rank which a man occupies in society. A white who rides barefooted on horseback thinks he belongs to the nobility of the country. Color establishes even a certain equality among men who, as universally the case where civilization is either little advanced or in a retrograde state, take a particular pleasure in dwelling on the prerogatives of race and origin. When a common man disputes with one of the titled lords of the country, he is frequently heard to say, "Do you think me not so white as yourself?" This may serve to characterize the state and source of the actual aristocracy. It becomes, consequently, a very interesting business of public vanity to estimate accurately the fractions of European blood which belong to the different castes [*sic*].²⁴

By starting his *casta* set with a Spanish woman on top, Mena undermines the usual assertion of Spanish male dominance in establishing the framework of social hierarchy. Spanish ideas of honor and racial purity (*limpieza de sangre*) made Spaniards vigilant—some would say obsessed—concerning control of Spanish women's sexuality, which was linked to family honor.²⁵ Publicly perceived loss of control over women's sexuality reflected badly on the whole family and impugned the family's collective honor. For that reason, Mena's pairing of an elegantly attired Spanish woman and a half-naked barbarian native was nowhere in the realm of social reality. One scholarly assessment is that "the aberrant combination not only mocks social protocol but also seems to underscore the very artificiality of a *casta* system that pretends to circumscribe social fluidity and economic mobility."²⁶ But is that the explanation?

A better answer is that the pair is an allegory. Allegorical Indians do appear in other paintings of Guadalupe. One by an unknown artist places Guadalupe in the center of the composition with an opulently dressed female "Europe," while an androgynous "America," dressed in a feather skirt and feather chest covering, holds a bow and has

24. Von Humboldt, 87–88, trans. John Black (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972).

25. Patricia Seed, *To Love, Honor, and Obey in Colonial Mexico: Conflicts over Marriage Choice, 1574–1821* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988); Lyman L. Johnson and Sonya Lipsett-Rivera, eds. *The Faces of Honor: Sex, Shame, and Violence in Colonial Latin America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998); Ann Twinam, *Public Lives, Private Secrets: Gender, Honor, and Sexuality in Colonial Spanish America* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); and Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*.

26. Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 258.

a container for arrows.²⁷ “*Non fecit taliter omni nationii*” scrolls from America’s mouth.²⁸ Another painting shows two indigenous men: one dressed in colonial-era clothing, offering flowers to Guadalupe; one an *indio bárbaro* dressed in feathers, the same iconography as the “America” just described—feathers, bow and arrow, and a “*Non fecit taliter*” scroll.²⁹ For Mena’s *indio bárbaro*, one scholar suggests “the image functions as an allegory for the ‘civilizing’ and Christianizing process.”³⁰ If so, Mena does not develop the notion explicitly, except by juxtaposition. His *española* (the allegorical Europe?) and Chichimeca (“America”?) turn away from the image of Guadalupe rather than toward her.

Was Mena’s *indio* the embodiment of the noble savage? A whole discourse emerged in the seventeenth century among Creole patriots to account for differences between the races and to counter Europeans’ assertions that New World populations were degraded. That culminated in what one scholar has argued was the invention of separate bodies for Indians and whites.³¹ Mena’s uniting of a light-skinned Spanish woman and the nearly nude Indian man could be read in the eighteenth century as not just the unlikely union of high culture and raw nature, civilization and barbarism, but also of two bodies of different essences. But if so, Mena’s *española* and *indio* were of essences that were not so different as to prevent couplings and offspring.

One pathway to understand Mena’s purpose in depicting this family is to focus on their mestizo son, who is portrayed in a manner conventional to casta painting, dressed well and placed close to his parents. This particular boy holds a child-sized bow and arrow, emulating his *indio* father’s tools for hunting and fighting. But unlike his befeathered father, the child is fully dressed in Spanish fashion,

27. From the early sixteenth century, European artists in France, Germany, and Italy depicted “America” as a naked or nearly naked woman, rarely as a man, Hugh Honour, *The New Golden Land: European Images of America from the Discoveries to the Present Time* (New York: Pantheon books, 1975), 84–117; Jaime Cuadriello, “Our Lady of Guadalupe of Mexico, Patroness of New Spain,” in *La Reina de las Américas: Works of Art from the Museum of the Basílica de Guadalupe* (Chicago: Mexican Fine Arts Center, 1996), catalog number 38.

28. [The lord] has not done this for any other nation. The phrase emphasizes the uniqueness of Mexico’s connection to the divine.

29. The painting is also in the collection of the Basílica of Guadalupe. It has been published in a number of places, including Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, fig. 8.12, 226. “*Non fecit taliter omni nationii*” began to be included in paintings of Guadalupe to emphasize that the lord had singled out Mexico alone for the apparition of the Virgin.

30. Martínez, *Genealogical Fictions*, 256.

31. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, “New World, New Stars: Patriotic Astrology and the Invention of Indian and Creole Bodies in Colonial Spanish America,” *American Historical Review* 104, no. 1 (1999), 33–68.

pointing to his being raised in the Hispanic sphere rather than indigenous culture. This family embodies the arguments of sixteenth-century theologian Francisco de Vitoria, "that it was education that was responsible for Indians' behavior."³²

Mena takes the mestizo child out of the realm of nature, showing him being acculturated to Spanish lifeways, including Christianity, and thereby becoming an integral part of Hispanic society. The message is reified by asserting that Spanish and Christian culture can overcome even the most uncivilized pagan (male) Indian's nature, even through the body of the second-sex *española*. The *española*, like Guadalupe, can be conceived of as the maternal, Christianizing force for the colony, as well as the embodiment of Europe, depicted in the standard way as female.

Their mestizo son holds onto vestiges of Indian culture, literally holding a bow and arrow, but they are toys, not tools. This well-dressed child is destined for civilized pursuits, not hunting or warfare. Although Mena's *española* could hardly have asserted high status amongst her high society peers by being coupled with the *indio bárbaro*, their mestizo offspring would have enjoyed legal exemption from tribute. And there was the possibility that future offspring could be upwardly mobile through marriage to a Spaniard (or one who passed as such), which was the assertion of racial whitening of the Spanish + Indian mixture.

After that initial bombshell of a casta grouping, Mena's second panel in the colonial racial narrative is a mixed-race family following the conventional path of returning to whiteness through strategic marriage. The narrative of white-Indian intermixture is the perceived ability to return to racial purity. Mena's family of an *española* with a well-dressed mestizo (white-Indian parentage) who produced a *castizo* child is within the realm of social possibility. Mena is not unique in pairing a higher status Spanish woman with a mestizo, although more commonly, the person of higher racial status is the male of the couple. Mena's mestizo, however, has the distinctive haircut generally associated with a pure-blooded, Hispanicized Indian man of the central region.³³ From archival evidence we know that many indigenous men and women changed their racial designation from Indian to mestizo during their lifetimes, but their reclassification in a higher

32. Ibid., 67.

33. That hairstyle, called *melena*, consisted of a fringe of hair around the face with long sideburns reaching below the shoulders, and the rest of the head shaved, Cope, *The Limits of Racial Domination*, 53–54.

racial category might well have been accompanied by changes in their personal presentation that facilitated upward racial passing.

Mena's depiction of the adult mestizo who looks like an Indian is another instance of his idiosyncratic representation of racial types, since the mestizo calls attention to his Indian heritage, rather than hiding it. By pairing him with an *española*, Mena can be seen to be asserting the importance of Spanish women to the process of whitening their offspring in both race and culture, a process that culminates in the restoration of racial purity, shown in the next family grouping. The emphasis on the Indianness of the mestizo may be a way to highlight difference and draw on the power of the Spanish woman to overcome it.

In the third panel, a *castiza* woman (i.e., three-quarters white) and a Spanish man and their pale-skinned *española* babe-in-arms daughter are the visual embodiment of the most elite of mixed-race families.³⁴ In the legal classifications of race, *castizos* are closely associated with *españoles*, and were seen as desirable matches for *españoles*. In all the known casta paintings, women are more frequently depicted in the category than men. Mena follows the convention of most casta paintings that generally does not deconstruct the category *español* to specify Peninsular or American-born Creole. This upward racial mobility, in what can be termed the restoration of racial purity,³⁵ is described in 1774 by Spanish-Irish merchant and traveler, Don Alonso O'Crouley. In his detailed illustrated text, he included a discussion of the *sistema de castas*. One of his observations was:

If the mixed-blood is the offspring of a Spaniard and an Indian, the stigma [of race mixture] disappears at the third step in descent because it is held as systematic that a Spaniard and an Indian produce a *mestizo*; a *mestizo* and a Spaniard, a *castizo*; and a *castizo* and a Spaniard, a Spaniard. The admixture of Indian blood should not indeed be regarded as a blemish, since the provisions of law give the Indian all that he could wish for, and Philip II granted to *mestizos* the privilege of becoming priests. On this consideration is based the common estimation of descent from a union of Indian and European or creole Spaniard [*sic*].³⁶

34. Most children in this category, where the gender can be determined, are females, Sarah Cline, "Casta Children in the Making of Creole Identity" (paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Council on Latin American Studies, Flagstaff, Arizona, April 9–12, 2008).

35. Katzew calls the process "racial mending," which conveys the general meaning as well, Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 48–51.

36. Sr. Don Pedro Alonso O'Crouley, *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain*, trans. and ed. Sean Galvin (San Francisco: John Howell Books, 1972), 20.

Mena's replication of this family group without deviation from the stereotype strongly implies that he subscribed fully to the notion of the restoration of racial purity for the offspring of light-skinned Indian-Spanish mixes (*castizos*) and Spaniards.

No portion of African heritage allowed a return to Spanish racial purity. Mena's next sets show *español* and African mixtures. He follows the convention of casta paintings, the pairing of one European parent, the other an African, with their mulatto child. Although archival evidence from eighteenth-century Mexico City points to the disappearance of those termed *negros*, Mexican painters retain the term with separate standing in the casta genre.³⁷

Mena also follows the convention of placing this group in the *negra's* sphere—the kitchen. Many casta paintings include a larger social context for the mixed-race groupings, and for that reason they are a valuable source on quotidian life in colonial Mexico. Mena has not generally provided that larger context in his casta groupings, but this one is an exception, following the convention of Spaniards and Afro-Mexican women in the work environment of the kitchen.

A number of casta paintings of this family grouping (*español, negra, mulato/a*) have scenes of domestic violence, often a black woman physically assaulting a white man, her social superior.³⁸ The obvious message is that a union between a white man and a black woman is fraught with danger, overturning social mores of (white) male control. In panel four, Mena's scene is no less problematic. The Spaniard is dressed for work with his sleeves rolled up; the elegantly attired black woman is seated demurely at the man's feet. At first glance, she seems a typically subservient woman. But the standing *español* is not shown in a position of authority, but rather of subordination. He is at the stove, sleeves rolled up for work, clearly in the (gendered female) act of cooking. He lacks typical attire symbolic of high social standing. Most strikingly, he wears an ankle-length apron covering his red pants. Although the apron is obviously functional, it is a female gendered garment appropriate for his womanly activity of cooking. The apron metaphorically castrates him, for this woman's

37. Valdés, "The Decline of the *Sociedad de Castas*."

38. One set by Andrés de Islas with this kitchen scene was copied at least three times, Sarah Cline, "Social Dissonance in Eighteenth-Century Mexican Casta Paintings" (paper presented at the University of California, Santa Barbara, October, 2009) and "Interview with Sarah Cline" in *How the World Got Mixed Up*, dir. David Okuefuna (2011; Bristol BBC Productions).

garment covers his genital region, erasing his maleness with female draping.³⁹

The *negra*'s seated posture in Mena's painting can be read as the black woman's lack of proper submission to the white man—her superior in gender and race—and her rather improper assertion of control over him. Delegating cooking to others is the prerogative of elite women in most societies. Here the *negra* is in a position of power not only by bringing her *español* sexual partner into her sphere, but also by having him do her work.

Another dissonant element in this family grouping is Mena's depiction of their mulatto son. Unlike most children in casta paintings who are placed physically close to their parents, suggesting family harmony, this child stands apart from his parents and neither adult focuses on him.⁴⁰ Both parents have their backs to him, merely ignoring or actively rejecting him. The son distances himself from his father who is performing feminized work as a cook. The boy holds a riding whip, a manlier tool than his father's kitchen utensils. Afro-Mexican men were often liverymen and a number of casta paintings have images of them with whips.⁴¹ Mena's mulatto boy is more elegantly attired than his *español* sire, with a coat, red vest, knee-length pants, and knee-high stockings; and he is more appropriately male in his dress and manner than his pure-blooded European father. Overall, the family grouping has the form typical of most casta paintings: a Spanish man and a black woman in the kitchen with their mixed-race offspring. But key elements have been shifted from the stereotypes to create a scene of social dissonance that is not as obvious or extreme as outright violence. But it is also not one of harmony.

In panel five, Mena creates another family image of a racially superior Spanish woman (*española*) paired with an inferior man—in this case, a mulatto. Although generally mulattos are not depicted with higher status Spanish women, Mena is not unique in creating this unequal pairing. The child in Mena's scene is a pale-skinned *morisca* (a term for a light-skinned black) girl with auburn hair like her mother's. As with the well-dressed mulatto boy in panel four, the adult mulatto in panel five also holds a liveryman's whip. He wears

39. In the only other casta painting showing a man cooking, the scene is also highly unusual, García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, set XL, a.

40. Cline, "Casta Children in the Making of Creole Identity."

41. O'Crouley, *The Kingdom of New Spain*, shows a *negro* and an *india* with the man holding a whip, as does the set XXXVII, i, in García Sáiz's *Las castas mexicanas*, and also, a single canvas by José de Páez, addendum C, panel 9, set XXX, e, shows a *mulato* with a whip and his *española* wife.

a tricorner hat and a white shirt with ruffles down the front and the sleeves. Over the shirt is a red waistcoat, open in front, and over that, a well-tailored black coat cut in at the waist and flaring out, ending at his knees. He has tight black pants, black stockings, and black shoes with a large buckle over the instep. Dress of liverymen was a matter of royal sumptuary regulation.⁴² Although he is racially inferior to his wife and daughter, the mulatto has male pride of place with the two females shown behind him. However, the Spanish woman physically unites the family, putting her right hand on her partner's left shoulder, and holding their daughter's right hand with her left. Both father and child gaze forward toward the viewer, the woman toward her partner. This is a scene of harmony, consistent with many examples in the *casta* genre. Again, there is the possibility that Mena's emphasis on Spanish women (as well as the Virgin) depicts them as harmonizing mediators.

In panel six, Mena pairs a *morisca* with a Spaniard, accompanied by their *albino torna-atrás* ("light-skinned throwback") child. The Spaniard is dressed in clothing for leisure, with a white coat and a white head-covering, typical of upper class men. He is shown half reclining on a sofa with his legs up but with his torso upright. In all the depictions of *casta* families in Mena's painting, this sofa is the only piece of furniture. In her body stance, the *morisca* mother is shown like the *española* in panel one directly above her, with both women appearing to gaze at Guadalupe's image. Both the *morisca* and the Spaniard are very pale, but as expected in the logic of *casta* paintings, their *albino torna-atrás* offspring is much darker than his parents.

The category of *torna-atrás* was a standard racial designation in *casta* paintings, but it was not a term in common parlance and never a term of self-definition. *Torna-atrás* and its synonym *salta pa'atrás* were labels in *casta* paintings, not legal categories or terms of self-description. Such terms were ways elites could insult and belittle their racial inferiors.⁴³ The racial terms for the offspring of men and women who are themselves of mixed race were not standardized.

The number of racial terms in *casta* paintings far exceeds the legal classifications of race used for taxation, eligibility for military service, jurisdiction of the inquisition, and access to special courts. The lack of uniformity of terms for racial mixtures at the bottom of the scale

42. Richard Konetzke, ed., *Colección de documentos para la formación de Hispanoamérica* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1962), III: 92.

43. García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 24–29. García Sáiz provides a chart of 25 racial terms found in paintings, the meaning of the terms, and the mixtures that produced them. A number of the terms cannot be translated.

and the generally downscale economic circumstances of these individuals may well indicate Creoles' lack of interest in the finer points of categorizing plebeians.

Although unlikely biologically, the notion of a racial throwback to unbeknownst African ancestry is indicative of whites' racial prejudice and anxiety about the possibility of an unexpectedly dark-skinned offspring.⁴⁴ The multiple depictions in the *casta* genre of *torna-atrás* children of a pale *albino/a* parent and a Spanish partner, convey the message that no matter how white someone's appearance, potentially lurking in the person's ancestry is an African whose existence will forever stain future generations. O'Crouley comments, "From the union of a Spaniard and a Negro the mixed-blood retains the stigma for generations without losing the original quality of a mulato [*sic*]." ⁴⁵ Humboldt commented snidely on the racial awareness of American-born Spaniards, particularly the perceived taint of African ancestry: "In a country governed by whites, the families reputed to have the least mixture of Negro or Mulato [*sic*] blood are also naturally the most honoured."⁴⁶ How much this repeated imagery of the racial throwback was a Creole fantasy, an Iberian projection, or a social reality, is an open question. Clearly foreign observers picked up on the colonial elites' racial anxiety. Repetition implies resonance, but it also codifies and amplifies it. In this colonial society that paid such close attention to color distinctions as well as other signs of social status, a dark child could impugn the purity and honor of an elite family.

The parents with the *torna-atrás* child in Mena's painting seem to accept the child as their son, since he is dressed in clothes appropriate to the social status of his parents. However, neither parent touches him, gestures towards him, or looks at him to indicate inclusion. The affect of this family grouping is similar to that in panel four of the *negra* and *español* who have their backs to their mulatto son. Did Creole elites as a collectivity accept a *torna-atrás* as a social equal? There is a hint in one *casta* painting that a dark complexion barred a *torna-atrás* from a whites-only precinct of the capital. The painting, dated around 1770, shows well-dressed pale parents with their nearly black *torna-atrás* child on the rooftop of a building overlooking Mexico City's Alameda Park. According to one scholar, the *albina* mother appears to understand that her dark son will be

44. The fact that the term throwback exists in English with the same meaning indicates such anxiety was not exclusively Spanish.

45. O'Crouley, *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain*, 20.

46. Humboldt, *Political Essay on the Kingdom of New Spain*, 87–88.

banned from this historic, whites-only space.⁴⁷ There is ample colonial archival evidence that individuals whose skin color was inconsistent with their official racial designation frequently had to defend their higher official status.⁴⁸ Perhaps the fact that Mena shows the *morisca* mother of the *albino torna-atrás* child gazing at Guadalupe rather than her own son is not mere coincidence. Mena might be depicting her seeking solace in the dark-skinned Virgin who is symbolically mother to all Mexicans and would accept the dark child no matter what his skin color.

The sixth panel, with the *torna-atrás* child, ends the category of white-black mixtures and Mena proceeds to the third register of the *casta* genre where *españoles* are absent and the mixtures of non-white racial types are shown. However, Mena's third register of racial types is truncated to just two family groupings. In panel six—his depiction of a mestiza woman (white + Indian) with an *indio* man, and their *lobo*⁴⁹ (wolf) child—the differences in clothing of the three are quite marked. The Indian wears open sandals rather than shoes, indicating a level of poverty, but even so, this is an indicator that he is a step above the barefoot *indio bárbaro* in the first panel. Like the adult mestizo in the second panel, he has the typical hairstyle of an Indian man, and the attire also typical of that category: white pants that fall just above the knee and an open-necked blue tunic split at the sides and nearly reaching the bottom of his short pants. In his hand, he carries two fish on a string, likely alluding to his fishing the waters of the central lake system where the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan was originally built. Like the *indio bárbaro* in panel one with his bow and arrow, this *indio* can directly provide food for his family. In a gesture of paternal connection, he has his left hand on the head of his *lobo* son. The man cocks his head at an angle, seemingly shyly, eyeing his well-dressed mestiza wife. She holds her right hand demurely to her bosom in a gesture that is distinctly feminine. Like many other women in *casta* paintings labeled mestizas, she wears a semi-transparent mantilla and shawl. With her left hand, she gestures toward their son as a loving mother. The little boy is barefoot and shirtless, but he has a small, blue cloak over his shoulders,

47. Richard Kagan, *Urban Images of the Hispanic World 1493–1793* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 158–59.

48. Laura A. Lewis, *Hall of Mirrors: Power, Witchcraft, and Caste in Colonial Mexico* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

49. *Lobo* is a racial term for various explanations of the racial mixture: “the offspring of: *negro e india; cambujo e india; torna-atrás e india; mestizo e india; mulato e india; salta-atrás y mulata*,” García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 29.

a traditional garment of Indian males. His white pants have a red waistband, so the color of his minimal clothing is a combination of those his parents wear. He places an object on his lips, perhaps a cup or a musical instrument. Overall, there is a sense of sweetness and harmony in this family grouping.

The final panel is of an Indian woman and a *lobo* with their *indio* offspring. The *india* is depicted standing behind a large wooden tub filled with a white substance, most probably the fermented native drink pulque, made from the juice of the maguey. Spaniards and many Creoles considered pulque the quintessential native drink that Indians imbibed in excess. In Mena's casta scene there are two male figures, father and son, who are about the same size, making it difficult to tell which is which. This concluding, ambiguous casta grouping brings the racial portion of the painting to an abrupt close.

Why does Mena show Spanish women as the higher racial type in fully half of the casta families, generally atypical in the genre? Is he asserting the strength of European blood in mixed-race unions even in the body of the supposedly weaker sex? He repeats the Spanish woman at the top with mestizo and mulatto pairings. He does not go so far as to pair a black man with a Spanish woman, although there are some casta paintings showing that. Instead, Mena paints an effeminate rather than manly Spanish man with a strong black woman. His other examples of Spanish men show them paired with mixed-race women of the lightest complexions. Mena's Spanish men do not appear as the embodiment of honor, characterized by "assertiveness, courage, authority, and domination of women."⁵⁰

Mena may be calling on viewers to consider each of these women in relation to the Virgin, the ideal sacred woman chosen by God, who "has provided the content of the definition of the feminine in a way that [Jesus] has not done for the masculine."⁵¹ Through their linkages to lower status casta men, the Spanish women are actively participating in the creation of Mexico's Christian and multiracial society. Two of Mena's Spanish men are matched with the palest of mixed-race partners, the desirable, nearly white *castiza*, and the *morisca*, who, although appearing white, carries the stain of her ancestral blackness, producing the *albino torna-atrás*.

But the Spaniard paired with the black woman (unmediated by any white admixture) is emasculated by her and dishonored as

50. Geoffrey Spurling, "Honor, Sexuality and the Colonial Church," in *The Faces of Honor*, eds. Johnson and Lipsett-Rivera, 45.

51. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Mary Through the Centuries: Her Place in the History of Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 1.

a consequence. The Spaniard paired with the *morisca* cannot escape the stain of her unseen blackness, for their son is a throwback. Only with the *castizo* woman does the Spaniard succeed in remaining on top, with honor intact.

Why does Mena have such a small repertoire of *casta* families and entirely exclude Indian-Afro-Mexican mixtures? Mena likely knew all the conventions of the genre, since a fair number of examples survive from the mid-eighteenth century. By painting the small repertoire he departs from the canonical sixteen and ignores the existence of a significant portion of the urban population. Was his reduced number of groupings solely practical, since he had only so much room on the single canvas to devote to the *castas*? Was his exclusion of a whole register of Afro-Indian mixtures a deliberate suppression of the existence of these racial plebeians since they were of little interest to himself or to his elite viewers, or both?

His vision of the *castas* is in relationship to the Virgin of Guadalupe, whose pride of place in the painting cannot be ignored. Guadalupe is said to have appeared to an Indian in 1531 and from the beginning had a special bond with the indigenous populations around Mexico City. Her cult was later appropriated by Creole patriots. Although Afro-Mexicans did indeed venerate Guadalupe as part of mainstream Mexican Catholicism, and a prolific seventeenth-century mulatto artist, Juan Correa, produced many Guadalupe images, colonial-era images of Guadalupe do not link her visually with Afro-Mexicans and their devotion to her cult is not generally known.⁵²

The top register of Mena's painting should be considered the most important, with its image of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the premier manifestation of Mexico's connection to the divine.⁵³ The image of Guadalupe is carefully crafted and conforms to the exacting standards for renditions of her image. Mena might have used a pattern to trace the image, so that in every way her image was a precise replica of the sacred original.⁵⁴

52. A community of runaway black slaves in Oaxaca was given official status in 1769 with Guadalupe its patron saint, William B. Taylor, "The Foundation of Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe de los Morenos de Amapa," *The Americas* 26, no. 4 (1970): 439–446.

53. The literature in English on Guadalupe is vast. See the bibliographies in William B. Taylor, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain: An Inquiry into the Social History of Marian Devotion," *American Ethnologist* 14, no. 1 (1987): 9–33; D. A. Brading, *Mexican Phoenix, Our Lady of Guadalupe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); and Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*.

54. Peterson, "The Reproducibility of the Sacred: The Simulacra of the Virgin of Guadalupe," in *Exploring New World Imagery*, ed. Donna Pierce (Denver: Denver Art Museum, 2005), 41–78.

The traditional striated yellow halo surrounding her whole figure is intensified by a numinous white area that separates her from quotidian scenes and intrudes onto the casta register. Was the Virgin added to the work after Mena completed it? This is probably not the case, but there is evidence that the Virgin is the last element painted in the top register since her cloud overpaints the quotidian scenes. We might consider the possibility that the Virgin was not part of Mena's original plan for the composition; yet since he has a quotidian scene at Guadalupe's basilica, it is likely she was part of the original plan. And yet another possibility is that Mena himself did not render the Virgin's image, since it is technically and aesthetically so much superior to other elements of the composition. Whatever the case, the effect of the Virgin's cloud suggests that "heaven and earth interpenetrate both rhetorically and visually."⁵⁵

Mena continues the visual narrative connected with Guadalupe, depicting to the left of her image a scene related to her cult—an image of her basilica in Tepeyac with indigenous dancers and drummers; and to her right, a scene along a Mexico City canal. Many traditional paintings of Guadalupe have miniatures of the basilica, but Mena's is unique in showing and labeling a "Dance of the matachines done for Our Lady of Guadalupe."⁵⁶ Prehispanic Indians in many parts of Mexico had a long tradition of religious dance that sixteenth-century mendicant evangelists sought to transform to ones of Christian celebration. The origins of the matachine dance are obscure,⁵⁷ but as Spaniards expanded the empire northward, matachine dances were carried as cultural elements in the Spanish conquest of New Mexico and Texas.⁵⁸ The tradition continued to thrive in New Mexico in the late twentieth century, explicitly connected with Guadalupe, in what anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez calls the "beautiful dance of subjugation,"⁵⁹ for it is a stylized reenactment

55. Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 256.

56. The original writing on the painting reads: *Dansa de Matachines que asen a N. Sra. De Guadalu[p]e*.

57. Luis Weckman claims the name matachines is "from Arabic, *matuabchibin*, masked man," *The Medieval Heritage of Mexico* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1992), 545.

58. Texas Indians did matachine dances on Christmas Eve, Corpus Christi, and "even on occasions that are not feast days," *Guidelines for a Texas Mission*, quoted in Estrada de Gerlero, "The Representation of 'Heathen Indians,' in Mexican Casta Painting," 51.

59. Sylvia Rodríguez, *The Matachines Dance: Ritual Symbolism and Interethnic Relations in the Upper Rio Grande Valley* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996). Weckman dismisses the matachines as "simply a rather monotonous rhythmic dance," *Medieval Heritage of Mexico*, 546. Matachine dances have remained

of the conquest of central Mexico. Mena's matachines are seven male dancers, dressed in white shirts and short pants with feather decorations in their hair, and one female, dressed in a red skirt and a white blouse, or native *huipil*, with red feathers in her hair. Standing slightly away from the line of male dancers is a male drummer. They are performing apparently without an audience or other participants,⁶⁰ although there are daubs of paint elsewhere in the scene indicating visitors. Perhaps Mena deliberately focused on the dancers as a special devotion to Guadalupe, with more typical performances having larger participation of the community, similar to religious processions.

The scale of Mena's eighteenth-century matachine scene is too small to tell whether the figures correspond to the conquest-era personages found in some contemporary matachine dances. Although inferring eighteenth-century central Mexican practices based on twentieth-century New Mexico is problematic, there might be some relationship between the two. In New Mexico, the lone female matachine is designated Malinche, the name of Cortés's native cultural translator, and one of the male dancers is designated Moctezuma. In New Mexico, male dancers wearing iconic images of Guadalupe are part of the ceremonial attire for dances performed on her feast day.⁶¹

To the right of Mena's image of Guadalupe is the label, "Paseo de Jamayca," and a more ordinary outdoor scene. The scale is larger in this scene than the one of the basilica, so that the human figures and the landscape are clearly seen. In the late 1690s, Italian world traveler Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri wrote an account of his visit to the basilica followed by lunch at the canal of Jamaica, which he calls the "Posilipo of Mexico." His comparison is to a picturesque site in Naples, which later gave rise to the artistic School of Posilipo that emphasized natural beauty. He notes that at the canal:

one can go in canoes or boats (and if one wants, also on land), with a great number of musicians and singers, who compete (both women and men) in order to have the perfection of their song appreciated. At the side there are

a tradition amongst the Mayos and Yaquis in Northwestern Mexico, but they are not associated with Guadalupe, from Mary O'Connor, conversation with author, 2008; Electra L. Mompradé and Tonatiúh Gutiérrez, *Historia general del arte mexicana: danzas y bailes populares* (Mexico: Editorial Hermes, 1976), 194–95. Peterson claims without attribution that matachine was "a generic colonial term used as a stand-in for a variety of Indian dance movements," *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 258.

60. Without an audience is standard for socio-religious dances.

61. There are several eighteenth-century images of native dances with native crowns similar to the modern New Mexico dance attire, but none are labeled matachines as in Mena's painting.

humble houses of Indians and inns to take refreshment, that is to say, chocolate, *atole*, and *tamales*.⁶²

He returned to the canal several times during his stay in Mexico City, and notes even the wife of the viceroy visited there with many large coaches.⁶³ Another Italian traveler also visited the Paseo de Jamaica several times in the late eighteenth century and he too compared it to Posilipo. He was careful to say that, "Each time I went there with respectable, upstanding people," to justify his presence at a place known for the pleasures of food, drink, and music, as well as natural beauty.⁶⁴ He does not mention its proximity to the basilica.

Mena's crowded canal scene in the mid-eighteenth century shows a strolling couple, a man carrying a burden on his head and seated women selling things next to the canal that is full of long canoes or boats carrying people and goods. On the other side of the canal are major buildings, possibly another view of Guadalupe's sanctuary. It is a busy view of late colonial life in Mexico with different social types sharing public space. Mena's image labeled "Paseo de Jamayca" might be merely a slice of secular life, but its placement in the portion of the painting with clear religious elements points to the possibility of its resonance with them. The canal is geographically close to the sacred site of Guadalupe's church where many pilgrims traveled, and the place name "Jamaica" is likely significant, for in the colonial era it was a term for a charity sale or festive gathering to raise money for a good cause. The crown attempted to ban *jamaicas* in the late eighteenth century because they were places where men and women of all races mixed.⁶⁵

In the bottom portion of the composition, Mena paints fruits grown in Mexico arranged as a still life, a genre with few examples in colonial Mexico.⁶⁶ Mena's inclusion of named fruits is one of his innovations in the *casta* genre, with later artists generally integrating these elements into their compositions, in market scenes, kitchens,

62. Giovanni Francesco Gemelli Careri, *Viaje a la Nueva España* (published 1728), preliminary study, trans. and notes by Francisca Perujo (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1976), 76. My translation.

63. *Ibid.*, 113.

64. Fra Iliarione da Bergamo, *Daily Life in Colonial Mexico: The Journey of Friar Iliarione da Bergamo (1761–68)* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 117–18.

65. Juan Pedro Viqueira Albán, *Propriety and Permissiveness in Bourbon Mexico* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, 1999), 123–28.

66. A late eighteenth-century Mexican still life of a painter's cupboard (*alacena*) by Mexican artist Antonio Pérez de Aguilar is apparently one of the few extant that is often reproduced.

or even decorations on rococo borders of paintings.⁶⁷ These arrayed fruits, shown in some kind of container for display, are in the realm of art, not science, even though the fruits are numbered and named.

What did he choose for his inventory? It is revealing as much for what he omits as for what he includes. He paints seventeen fruits, each of which he numbers and then at the bottom register gives their names.⁶⁸ They are 1) *plátano gineo* (Guinea banana); 2) *sapote blanco* (white zapote); 3) *aguacate* (avocado); 4) *guallaba* (guava); 5) *piña* (pineapple); 6) *camote morado* (brown camote); 7) *camote blanco* (white camote); 8) *chirimolla* (cherimoya); 9) *tuna* (prickly pear); 10) *plátano largo* (long plantain); 11) *sapote prieto* (black zapote); 12) *tuna blanca* (white prickly pear); 13) *mamei* (mamey); 14) *cacaguate* (peanuts); 15) *calabasa* (calabash); 16) *challote* (chayote); 17) *sapote borracho* ("drunken zapote"/sapodilla plum).

Most of the plants were of New World origin, but the plantains were not. A number of Mena's fruits had only local Mexican consumers and retain names only slightly modified from their indigenous origins. Mena excludes a whole range of Mexican plants that could be grown in temperate and subtropical climates: maize, the native staff of life, tomatoes, and chili peppers. His omissions of commonly cultivated fruits may well be due to their lack of exoticism for Spanish viewers.

Why did Mena label the fruits? The fact that he does so strongly suggests that he is directing the painting to non-Mexican viewers, for locals would have been familiar with the fruits' common names. If he were attempting to educate Peninsular viewers to the Mexican cornucopia, he did so in a particularly Creole fashion, using local names for plants rather than Linnaean taxonomy. Recent research shows how Enlightenment-era debates on nomenclature, in which Spain and Spanish America were participants, were deeply implicated in eighteenth-century intellectual conflicts about the role of overseas empires.⁶⁹ Creole intellectuals and scientists resisted the Spanish crown's 1752 requirement to use only the Linnaean system of nomenclature for all botanical documentation.⁷⁰ But some Creole

67. García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66.

68. The plants and most of their numbers are readily seen on the large format poster, but in small scale reproductions it is impossible to read the labels, written in white on a blue background; García Sáiz's published description is the source for the identifications and spellings listed here, *Ibid.*

69. The late eighteenth century saw explicit scientific botanical projects, Bleichmar, *Visible Empire*.

70. Antonio Lafuente cites Miguel A. Puig-Samper, "Difusión e institucionalización del sistema linneano en España e América," in *Mundialización de la ciencia y cultura*

intellectuals were aware of the Linnaean system before its official adoption, if not the painter Luis de Mena.

Mena's artistic array of fruits was not a scientific presentation. With the fruits' placement at the bottom, they fit the overall hierarchy of the painting: sacred in the highest register, humans in the middle (with Guadalupe intruding into the middle register), and nature at the bottom. The fruits show Mexico's natural abundance and fecundity in the realm of plants and pair with the fecundity of Mexico's human population.⁷¹ The painting's middle and lower registers can be read as a narrative of production and reproduction. How much Mena was aware that he was mixing plants of Old and New World origin is unclear. In placing Mexican-grown fruits in conjunction with the Guadalupe, Mena could well be pointing to the Virgin's role as sacred agricultural intercessor.⁷²

A central question about this painting is how to account for the uniqueness of Mena's religious vision in contrast to hundreds of secular casta paintings. There was a substantial clientele for casta paintings. Was Mena experimenting in this composition, creating an amalgam for a particular (Spanish) patron, or testing the (export) market response? Or was it his own vision of eighteenth-century Mexico? Nothing is known about the patronage of Mena's work. If his paintings were created to test market response, this presumes it was seen by other artists or viewers who could potentially request a similar painting. If Mena's casta painting is the first to include labeled plants,⁷³ his innovation was taken up by other Mexican painters or they came to it independently. It was an unproblematic inclusion of a secular element in the casta genre. However, the painting's unique religious elements were never emulated by any other artist. Mena's prominent inclusion of the overtly religious symbolism of Guadalupe in the otherwise secular casta genre might have clashed with viewers' and potential patrons' notions that religious and secular images should be kept entirely separate.

nacional, eds. Antonio Lafuente, Alberto Elena, and María Luisa Ortega (Aranjuez: Doce Calles, 1993), 349–59.

71. The fruits could have sexual allusions, with elongated plantains alluding to male genitalia and various fruits that could reference female genitalia, but this might solely be a twenty-first century reading. The overall image of the painting is chaste.

72. Taylor notes that Guadalupe was associated with fecundity and indigenous agricultural rites; fields were named for her, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain," 19.

73. García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 66.

Is Mena's painting an ex-voto? These are devotional pictures usually commemorating a particular divine intervention.⁷⁴ It does have the visual hallmark of the ex-voto genre: a numinous sacred figure shown in the upper register of a scene, both connected, but deliberately set apart from the earthly ones below.⁷⁵ An ex-voto with Guadalupe (1743) by Baltasar Troncoso y Sotomayer shows her divine intervention in the capital, ending the 1737 Mexico City epidemic (see fig. 2). In the foreground of Troncoso's print are elite men on their knees in supplication while in the middle ground dead and dying Indians fall victim to the pestilence. In the upper right corner, angels hold aloft a large image of Guadalupe, acting "as a shield protecting Mexico from negative heavenly influences," to which the epidemic was attributed.⁷⁶ Following the Virgin's timely intervention, and as reciprocity between humans and the divine, grateful Mexicans designated Guadalupe patroness of Mexico City. These are events of which Luis de Mena would have been well aware, very likely even living through them himself.

While Mena's painting lacks an explicit narrative of a miraculous event, the work can be read as showing Guadalupe's divine presence and continuous intervention in Mexico, the sacred source of Mexico's earthly fecundity, peace, and order. In the mid-eighteenth century Guadalupe could be taking her role as mediator in maintaining the existing social order, with all its hierarchy and inequality. However, her accessibility to all who appealed to her and the sense that Guadalupe "did not seem to play favorites," makes her such a potent mediator for Mexico's mixed-race population.⁷⁷

Guadalupe is herself a symbol of hybridity and fecundity, believed to be the human mother of a divine son. The iconic image of Guadalupe is of just the Virgin herself, not mother with her holy child or as part of the Holy Family. With Mena's uniting Guadalupe and the castas, he may be making Mexicans themselves, in all their colors and crossings, her holy children. Even if other artists created casta works as completely secular works, and even if some of them

74. Ex-votos have a long history; clerics considered such art suspect, for the pictures were the direct connection between the human and the divine without priestly mediation, Solange Alberro, "Retablos and Popular Religion in Nineteenth-Century Mexico," in *Retablos y Ex-votos*, ed. Margarita de Orellana (México: Museo Franz Mayer y Artes de México, 2000), 73.

75. Elin Luque Agraz and Michele Beltrán, "Powerful Images: Mexican Ex-votos" in *Retablos y Ex-votos*, 79.

76. Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, "Spanish America: From Baroque to Modern Colonial Science," in *Cambridge History of Science Vol. 4: Eighteenth-Century Science*, ed. Roy Porter (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 726.

77. Taylor, "The Virgin of Guadalupe in New Spain," 19–20.



Figure 2. Baltasar Troncoso y Sotomayer, “The City of Mexico pleads for the Intercession of Our Lady of Guadalupe during the Plague of 1737.” It is the frontispiece of a 1743 work by Cayetano Cabrera y Quintero.

did so as part of the eighteenth-century’s rage for scientific classification, Mena’s patriotic and local, if idiosyncratic, vision is of a sacred, not secular, Mexico. Although he follows the conventions of two secular genres, casta paintings and still life, the essence of this work is religious and allegorical.

How might have this painting been read in the eighteenth century? For Iberian Spaniards Mena's painting would most likely have been an example of the exotic colonial, both secular and religious. For them, the entire composition could well have been a study in the baroque, the primitive, the exotic, and the mongrelized in the colony encompassing all that was retrograde or bizarre about New Spain. In the scene by the basilica, the befeathered matachine dancers perform a barely disguised pagan celebration, despite over two centuries of Catholic presence in Mexico. As for the Guadalupe herself, paintings of Mexico's Guadalupe are found in collections in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Spain, perhaps initially as *exotica*. After her image was deemed *acheiropoietic*, many more Spaniards collected Guadalupe as religious art.⁷⁸ Although some Spaniards with lengthy residence in New Spain are known to have become devotees of Guadalupe, it is unclear how widespread this was.

Unlike most *casta* paintings, which were produced for a Creole clientele in Mexico, Mena's painting was likely created "as a souvenir for export," as a composite depiction of life in the exotic colony designed for Spanish Peninsular viewers.⁷⁹ Mena's painting has an array of deeply Mexican elements, including the Dark Virgin. Peninsulars would have seen Mena's mixed couples as reinforcing their conceptions about American Spaniards, whose racial purity they considered at best suspect or at worst illusory. Pairing a barbarous Indian with an elegantly attired Spanish woman could be read allegorically as the pairing of civilized Europe and barbarous America. But they might also think that anything goes in this colonial outpost. On the surface, the overall aspect of Mena's *casta* set is of harmonious mixed marriages which could reinforce Peninsular Spaniards' self-congratulation about maintaining order despite the racially-mixed society with which it had to deal. The oversized fruits in the bottom quarter of the painting could have been read as a judgment that the colony's most noteworthy aspect was its exotic plants that could be exploited for imperial gain. For sophisticated Peninsular intellectuals, Mena's use of layman's nomenclature for Mexican fruit would categorize him as a provincial and unscientific Creole.

78. Peterson, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 262.

79. García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas*, 20. This explanation can be challenged as too narrow to cover a genre that was produced over a century and where there is now significant evidence of a local Mexican market for art. Single-canvas *casta* paintings including Mena's found in Spanish collections do, in fact, seem like composite post-cards, small-scale snapshots of colonial life that could be relatively easily transported home and displayed in a relatively small space. Peterson believes the painting was done for export, *Visualizing Guadalupe*, 258.

How might Creole patriots have read the painting? Some Creoles would read with pride, seeing their Virgin in picturesque scenes of daily life, and the lush array of local fruits. But they were acutely sensitive to Peninsular Spaniards' strong prejudices against colonial Mexicans. Peninsulars believed that the New World climate, and even its stars, undermined Creoles' superiority, making them no better than blacks and Indians, prompting Creole intellectuals to respond to attacks on their patria. Creoles would have had no problem with Mena's depiction of a Spanish man with an Indian woman. But Mena's pairings of the *española* with the *indio bárbaro* and the dominant black woman with the effeminate Spaniard could well have offended their notions of proper racial and gender hierarchies, and they may have dismissed the entire composition as a preposterous parody. The painting would render them mere colonial exotics in their "natural" environment. The Virgin of Guadalupe dominates the painting and her sacred and maternal presence might have reassured them that all was fundamentally well.

Why has Mena's painting become a popular exemplar in the modern scholarship on the casta genre? Likely several factors are at work: the recognition factor of Guadalupe and her potency in Mexican cultural iconography paired with castas; the efficiency in depicting the whole range of the casta genre on one canvas; and perhaps even the relative ease in securing permission to publish the image.⁸⁰ Scholars and journal editors are mindful of space issues, making the printing of images of a complete set a problem.

Mena's Guadalupe has instant recognition value for anyone familiar with Mexican culture. With Guadalupe and the castas placed in juxtaposition, the whole history of Guadalupe joins historical conceptions of Mexico as a mestizo nation (generally ignoring Afro-Mexicans). When a Mexican rock band such as Maldita Vecindad y los Hijos del Quinto Patio titles a song with a casta category, "*Saltapa'trás*," and writes lyrics about race, power, and gender in Mexican culture, it is clear some artists have an awareness of the impact of the colonial casta system in the current era.⁸¹ But the general public is unlikely to

80. Indeed this was the case for this article.—Ed.

81. "*Sangre con sangre, mujeres y hombres, / Poder, necesitas de nombres, / Temor, divisiones, colores y castas: / Herencia de segregaciones*" (Blood with blood, women and men, / Power, you need names, / Fear, divisions, colors, and castas: / Inheritance of segregation), Maldita Vecindad y Los Hijos del Quinto Patio, "*Saltapa'trás*," *Baile de Máscaras* (1996; Bertelsmann de México). The band uses "*Saltapa'trás*" for its song title, integrating Afro-Mexicans into the narrative of Mexican history.

be aware that casta paintings were thoroughly secular works and that Mena's painting is an anomaly in the genre.

Now inviting visitors to Museo de América into galleries that are arranged in what appears to be a recreation of an eighteenth-century cabinet of curiosities, Mena's painting is likely considered a colonial curiosity and exemplar of the exotic by earlier generations of Spanish viewers. Did Mena paint this work as a mere curiosity? Likely not, although there are many anomalous elements in it. But many of the painting's anomalies relate to Mena's baroque, emblematic vision of a vibrant and fertile Mexico, producing and reproducing richness, and all protected by Guadalupe's sacred gaze. According to writer Richard Rodriguez, "The Virgin of Guadalupe symbolizes the entire coherence of Mexico, body, and soul."⁸²

Mexicans in the (post)modern era viewing this painting may understand Luis de Mena's intent far better than eighteenth-century Creoles and Peninsular Spaniards. Heading to the museum shop, viewers can buy the Mena poster—and contemplate the puzzling elements of this remarkable work.

82. Richard Rodriguez, *Days of Obligation: An Argument with My Mexican Father* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 16–20.

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