

Sarah K. Jorgensen

EXHIBITION JOURNAL
Inventing Race:
Casta Painting and Eighteenth Century Mexico
April 4- August 8, 2004
Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Casta Painting and Eighteenth Century Mexico at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is touted as the first ever exhibition of Casta works. It is a large-scale exhibition that fills the main traveling exhibition space at the LACMA. However it is not a traveling exhibition. That this exhibition is the first of its kind and that such an expensive exhibition – with artworks borrowed from overseas and other museums- is not traveling, imply that the LA County felt that it was particularly important to share this exhibit with the general museum world and in particular, Southern Californians.

Casta painting was a term used for painting to describe outcomes of ethnic intermarriages. Most casta paintings in the show were composed of a husband and wife of different “race” and their offspring. The exhibition follows the development and the expansion of the idea of casta, or caste, from descriptions of people in New Spain created for old world patrons, to a virtual taxonomy of imagined races with economic, political, social, and moral implications.

Casta painting is defined and explored in various ways through out the exhibit: the beginning rooms focus on the roots of the term casta, how it underscored colonists pride in the diversity and prosperity of the viceroyalty. Through displays with decorated maps, books, and early ethnographies, the first rooms show how casta fulfilled Europe’s long-standing curiosity about the exoticism of the New World. The rooms that radiate from the central entrance are organized chronologically in order expose the development of casta painting and its transformation throughout the eighteenth century into a moralistic taxonomy.

The entry hall to the exhibit takes colors from colonial Spanish tiles: blue, orange and terracotta. The entrance hall is shaped like a mirror or picture from Mexico, or New Spain, as it was called during the period of Casta painting. Unfortunately, it takes three exhibition rooms (if you follow the prescribed order of the exhibit) until we are able to see a clear definition of the castes. These are frightening, and fascinating: because they delineate the curiosity and attitudes of colonial New Spain toward race and the effect of intermarriage. A list on a far wall in the third room explains the system of these human

castes. By the 14th and 15th mixture they receive animal names. For example, a Negro mixed with an Indian was termed a “lobo” or wolf. Some terms were moralistic, indicating that although an Indian could be bred into a European after 3 intermarriages with Europeans, a person of African heritage could not—and eventually would become a “return backwards”. Zoologically inspired names such as abarazado (white spotted) or horses with spots (bareno) also were used.

The final rooms of the exhibit show full suites (depicting the 16 castes) of casta paintings by named painters such as Jose de Alcibar and Miguel Cabrera. Some focus on the occupation of the castes, others on their moral attributes, other situates the castes in terms of seasons and agriculture: the “pick pocket wolf”, “the angry mulatto”, “and metizos harvesting pineapples”. A set of smaller paintings on oil on copper show children of one caste playing with swords, recreating the Spanish defeat of the Moors. Towards the end of the exhibit the paintings rendering black/Indian mixed race people become violent: showing stabbing. Usually the women who are these particular castes perpetrate the violence. Perhaps this topic – taxonomy of morals- has not been exhausted. It’s interesting that as I write this, I am listening to a NPR interview with a man writing about the “biological basis” for human morals.

In general, the earlier paintings show the castes rendered in opulence. The earliest paintings appear to be more celebratory of the exotic diversity in New Spain. The later painting conveys moralistic, racist undertones of enlightenment systemology.

I noticed that most Angelinos were looking intently at the pictures in awe. It surprised me that some people could walk through the exhibit without reading the wall text. According to my brother, the “wall texts were more interesting than the paintings”. Initially, that is true, because the paintings – all triumvirates of man, woman and child— seem to be the same, and the texts provide an interesting background and explain the vocabulary of the texts on the paintings. Oddly, I heard a man towards the end of the exhibit comment that “wow, these people are married”—I wondered how he could not have noticed this until the end. A few things weren’t explained: was the reason why most women depicted had a mole because of fashion, or was it a delineation of race? Was there a change towards moralistic systemology? —The text does not say this, but the paintings indicate this. The wall texts impel you to look further, although they don’t teach you how to look further and they do leave out aspects of history with their focus on identity.

Some of the most interesting aspects of this exhibit are the idea of “presenting” the New World to the Old World. For example, Parrots in the Netherlands and Spain were symbols of exoticism and of fidelity—so casta paintings with parrots showing this of marital fidelity and constancy supported the idea of a multiracial society held together by a bond of love. It underscores trade, my mother was fascinated with the depiction of Mexican women’s underskirts made from Chinese fabrics (which she recognized, but was not made mention of in the exhibit). Also the dress in these paintings, for example charms children as protection, show imminent illness and problems with infant mortality. These aspects of the paintings highlight that Mexico City was at the crossroads of the major trading route. Also the paintings highlight the effect of the Bourbons regaining power (affecting men’s clothes for one thing), and how affect of the enlightenment acted the concerns of reformers and intellectuals in Bourbon Spain. For example: Casta paintings from this period show an industrious, healthy society, including blacks, mestizos, and so forth, engaged in multiple occupations. This is in contradistinction to the later paintings of black women killing their husbands, while white “castizos” are portrayed in genteel occupations such as playing the violin.

At the end of the exhibit was a desk of catalogues from the exhibit being poured over by a few college age adults. I felt that it was appropriate, in this case, that there were not other books, say about Mexican art, available. Because of the unique nature of the exhibit, perhaps the only thing else that could have been supplied was a history of race book or an anthropological/ colonial history book which highlights world history from a non western perspective (or in terms of what the colonies offered the old world) such as the Eric Wolf book “Europe and the People Without History”. I would have also liked to know where most of these paintings came from: most seemed to be from Parisian private collections, the University of Denver or libraries in Spain and one Mexico City Bank. The history of ownership of these paintings might indicate more about who they were intended for and what purposes they were used for in the Americas vs Europe.