



Pintura de Castas, LACMA

## Up-Close: Casta Paintings

Describe and Guess::

1. **Do not show your painting yet.** Instead, describe in it words. Describe some of the details that caught your eye, as well as the general feel of the painting. What's going on in the scene? What emotions or ideas does the painting seem to convey?
2. Ask your group: "How do you imagine painting based on my description?"
3. Now it's time to **show your painting.** Go over your description again and mention everything that caught your attention.

Group Discussion::

Now let's consider the paintings as a whole, noting their commonalities and differences. Discuss the following questions:

1. How are people represented? How would you describe their gestures and appearances? What attributes are being emphasized?
2. What is the relation between the *casta* and the activities and professions? How does the painting represent social class or *estamento* (social group)?

3. How would you describe the painter's gaze? What is his general attitude? Is it, for example, critical, endearing, dignifying, cunning, discriminatory, laudatory or neutral?
4. How do you imagine the painting would have been received?

### 3. Debate:

Please debate some of the following questions:

- Are these paintings an effort to impose a ethnic classification, or are they a celebration or recognition of *mestizaje* (mixing)?
- Do the paintings affirm or question the existence of “caste society” in colonial Latin America?

But first, let’s read some quotes that present divergent views around the notion of *casta* in Latin America:

#### Quote No. 1

“[E]ach one of us is a *Noteentiendo*, like the figure drawn in one of the sixteen vignettes of the painting “Las Castas,” a sort of Game of the Goose of love and bloodlines that I remember seeing hanging on a wall of the Mexico City Museum. Each of the sixteen vignettes of the painting contains three figures: the man and the woman whose different bloods imperiously demand to unite, and a gentle child born of their encounter, who in the following vignette, already an adult, is the protagonist of the new marriage, from which another child is born, destined to continue the chain of miscegenation: the Mestizo, son of the Spanish and the Indian, the Castizo, his son, the Mulatto to whom a Spanish woman gives an attractive Moorish and so on until the Chino, the Lobo, the Jíbaro son of the Lobo and the China, the Albarazado son of the Mulata and the Jíbaro and father of a Cambujo, father in turn of a Zambaigo. The painting would aspire to classify and differentiate rigorously-even through clothing-the social and racial castes, but it ends up involuntarily exalting the capricious and rebellious game of eros, the great destroyer of any closed social hierarchy, the disrupter and mixer of any ordered deck of cards, which alternates the spades with the clubs or with the diamonds to make the game possible and enjoyable.”

“[C]ada uno de nosotros es un *Noteentiendo*, como la figura dibujada en una de las dieciséis viñetas de la pintura “Las Castas”, una especie de juego de la oca del amor y de las estirpes que recuerdo haber visto colgado en una pared del Museo de la Ciudad de México. Cada una de las dieciséis viñetas de la pintura contiene tres figuras: el hombre y la mujer cuyas sangres diferentes exigen imperiosamente unirse, y un apacible niño nacido de su encuentro, que en la viñeta siguiente, ya adulto, es el protagonista del nuevo connubio, del que nace otro hijo destinado a continuar la cadena del mestizaje: el Mestizo, hijo del Español y de la India, el Castizo, su hijo,

el Mulato al que una Española regala un adornado morisco y así sucesivamente hasta el Chino, el Lobo, el Jíbaro hijo del Lobo y de la China, el Albarazado hijo de la Mulata y del Jíbaro y padre de un Cambujo, padre a su vez de un Zambaigo. La pintura aspiraría a clasificar y diferenciar rigurosamente—incluso mediante la vestimenta— las castas, sociales y raciales, pero acaba por exaltar involuntariamente el juego caprichoso y rebelde del *eros*, el gran destructor de cualquier jerarquía social cerrada, el disgregador y mezclador de cualquier ordenada baraja, que alterna los oros con las copas o con las espadas para hacer posible y placentero el juego.”

Claudio Magris, *El Danubio*, 1986

## Quote No. 2

This book opens new dimensions on race in Latin America by examining the extreme caste groups of colonial Mexico. In tracing their experiences, a broader understanding of the connection between mestizaje (Latin America's modern ideology of racial mixture) and the colonial caste system is rendered. Before mestizaje emerged as a primary concept in Latin America, an earlier precursor existed that must be taken seriously. This colonial form of racial hybridity, encased in an elastic caste system, allowed some people to live through multiple racial lives. Hence, the great fusion of races that swept Latin America and defined its modernity, carries an important corollary. Mestizaje, when viewed at its roots, is not just about mixture, but also about dissecting and reconnecting lives. Such experiences may have carved a special ability for some Latin American populations to reach across racial groups to relate with and understand multiple racial perspectives. This overlooked, deep history of mestizaje is a legacy that can be built upon in modern times.

Ben Vinson III, *Before mestizaje the frontiers of race and caste in colonial Mexico*

## Quote No. 3

The castas system reflected the concerns of Spanish and creole elites for maintaining a socioracial hierarchy in the presence of increased racial mixing (Katzew 2004). In this hierarchy, Spaniards were on top and indigenous people and Africans at the bottom, with mixed-race individuals falling somewhere in between, depending on the composition of their mixture. The castas system was captured through a series of images or paintings; these visual representations became one of the first exercises in social taxonomy based on descent, phenotype (i.e., skin color and facial features), class (i.e., occupation), culture (i.e., language, food habits, dress, etc.), and, most importantly, legal rights and obligations. Even though social and legal inequality was one consequence of the ethnic and racial categorizations that existed in New Spain, the castas system also represented the beginning of mestizaje practices that involved not only miscegenation but also cultural synthesis, of which indigenous peoples' contributions were especially important (Aguirre Beltrán 1992 [1957]; Gruzinski 2000).

## Quote No. 4

“Recently, some authors have explicitly questioned this historiographical commonplace [i.e. the idea of ‘caste society.’] Pilar Gonzalbo, in her work significantly entitled “The Caste Trap,” dismisses, on the basis of a careful review of sources, the idea of the existence of a caste society in New Spain, understood as a “social organization based on race and supported by coercive resources of power.” For her part, Joanne Rappaport, in her book on New Granada (Colombia), rejects the caste system as an interpretative framework for that time, discussing both the legitimacy of a valid model for the entire colonial world and the usual association between ‘caste’ and ‘race’. In the same sense, Berta Ares’s contribution on the Peruvian case—the other great American viceroyalty—reviews the term caste itself, its uses and possible meanings, going back to the sources, from its use in the peninsula to the Peruvian case and from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. She demonstrates its very scarce use by viceregal authorities during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [...] In the eighteenth century, its use would continue to be scarce and would normally appear in the plural, characterized by an ambiguity as to who were considered or not as castes: the word did not refer exclusively to the sectors of the population of mixed ancestry, but even to Spaniards and Indians, and also appeared together with many other terms (*plebe, vulgo, nations, classes, cualidades, other people, etc.*).”

“Recientemente, algunos autores han cuestionado explícitamente este lugar común historiográfico [i.e. la idea de “sociedad de castas.”] Pilar Gonzalbo, en su trabajo significativamente titulado “La trampa de las castas”, descarta, sobre la base de una cuidadosa revisión de fuentes, la idea de la existencia de una sociedad de castas en Nueva España, entendida como una «organización social basada en la raza y apoyada en recursos coercitivos de poder». Por su parte, Joanne Rappaport, en su libro sobre Nueva Granada, rechaza el sistema de castas como un marco interpretativo para esa época, discutiendo tanto la legitimidad de un modelo válido para todo el mundo colonial como la usual asociación entre “casta” y “raza”. En ese mismo sentido va la contribución de Berta Ares sobre el caso peruano—el otro gran virreinato americano—que revisa el propio término casta, sus usos y posibles significados, volviendo a retomar las fuentes, desde el empleo en la península hasta el caso peruano y desde el s. XVI al s. XVIII. Puede así demostrar su escasísimo uso por parte de las autoridades virreinales durante los siglos XVI y XVII [...] En el siglo XVIII, su uso seguiría siendo escaso y aparecería normalmente en plural, caracterizándose por una ambigüedad sobre quiénes eran considerados o no como castas: la palabra no se refería exclusivamente a los sectores de la población de ascendencia mezclada, sino incluso a españoles e indios, y aparecía además unida a otros muchos términos (*plebe, vulgo, naciones, clases, calidades, otras gentes, etc.*).”

## Notas:



