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The Mulatto Gentlemen of Esmeraldas, Ecuador

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This remarkable group portrait, painted in 1599 by Andrés Sánchez Gallque, is the oldest surviving signed and dated painting from colonial South America. The three nearly life-size figures are clearly identified by name and age, all with the Spanish honorific title of don: Don Francisco de Arobe, age 56, in the middle, flanked by his son, Don Pedro, age 22, and another young man, Don Domingo, age 18. Don Francisco was the leader of a previously independent Afro-Indian community in the province of Esmeraldas on the north coast of Ecuador. A 1606 report describes him as the Spanish-speaking Mulatto (of mixed African ancestry; here, presumably, African and Indian) *gobernador*, or governor, of a settlement of thirty-five Mulattoes and 450 Christian Indians, some of them native to the area, others removed from distant coastal areas and governed by the Mulattoes as their subjects. In 1597, following the military and diplomatic efforts of Juan del Barrio de Sepúlveda (a judge on the Audiencia of Quito) and the missionary work of the Mercedarian Diego deTorres, Don Francisco and his community accepted Spanish authority and Christianity.

When these three men visited Quito two years later, Barrio commissioned the portrait and sent it to Spain as a memento of the event, celebrating a favorite imperial story about securing new frontiers and converting

barbarians. The three figures are dressed in an ethnically mixed style of courtly attire. The lace collars and sleeves, as well as the satin or silk cloaks, were Spanish fashions. The artist draws attention to the garments by emphasizing the folds and ruffs as well as the rich color and sheen of the cloaks. Beneath his cloak each man wears an Andean-style poncho made of European brocade-like material. Underneath the poncho is a European-style sleeved and buttoned shirt, with a fancy *lechuguilla*, or ruff. The fine cloth and style of dress best suited to the cool highlands add to their appearance of civility and dignity. As Barrio notes in a letter that accompanied the portrait, people from the coast normally wore only a light shirt. In the portrait it is the golden ornaments piercing their faces and the necklaces of white seashells worn over the ponchos that distinguish them as men of the coast. These ornaments have a long tradition there, dating back to at least 500 B.C., as seen on Jama-Coaque and La Tolita ceramic figurines.


DON FRAN DE AROBE
DŌDOMINGO

Figure 18. "The Mulatto Gentlemen of Esmeraldas," Ecuador, 1599. Courtesy of the Museo de América, Madrid.

The three men appear as if standing before the king as his loyal subjects, doffing their hats and holding their new steel-tipped spears as though they were ready to defend the coast against the king's enemies, whether English and Dutch pirates or hostile Indian groups and Mulatto slavers. It was surely intended as a likeness, for it was regarded by its patron, the high court judge, as a document of an American event; only now do we look at it as a freestanding work of art. But something else is going on here, too. In a sense the three black gentlemen are trophies, stuffed and mounted on a wall of blue.

The painting offers little, if anything, about how the three men thought about their attire and the portrait-making event, but it is fair to assume that they did not regard themselves as fixed in their proper place, as we see them here. The 1606 report adds something of their longer view of the event and tells a less triumphant imperial story than does the 1599 painting. In 1605 the province of Esmeraldas was convulsed by raids and bloody battles among rival Mulatto elites and their Indian subjects and allies. Don Francisco and his companions were not accused of participating in the upheaval, but colonial officials were disappointed by his failure to help bring the perpetrators to justice. When reprimanded for their indifference, his son, Don Pedro, reportedly threatened to burn their fields and disappear into the jungle if the Spaniards sent a punitive expedition. The colonial investigator in 1606 complained that Don Francisco and his people were drunkards and not true Christians ("they are not Christians in their hearts"), and he concluded that the money spent in Quito for blankets, jugs of wine, and fine clothing (perhaps the very outfits displayed in the portrait) had been wasted on them.

Whether or not they were Mulattoes in the Spaniards' racial sense, the portrait and the 1606 record show Don Francisco and his young companions as new people in a cultural sense—part African, part Indian, part Spanish

Christian, and now American in their particular way, as social categories loosened and were reshaped on the margins of the Spanish empire.

Judge Barrio's selection of the artist to paint the portrait is almost as interesting as the painting itself. Sánchez Gallque was an Indian born in Quito who trained in the European style of painting with Pedro Bedón, a Dominican friar and artist. Along with other native artists, Sánchez Gallque belonged to the Confraternity of the Rosary, established by Bedón with the utopian aim of bringing Spaniards, Indians, and Africans together. In a way, such a wish is expressed in this portrait to which Mulatto, Indian, and Spaniard all contributed. But this resort to pictorial representation as a way of conveying information to royal authorities in Spain also expressed another kind of "Americanization"—an enforced, Spanish one in which colonial subjects were regarded as incompletely Hispanicized, requiring perpetual tutelage and restraint. Combining both expressions, the portrait of these three men becomes as hauntingly familiar and remote as the nineteenth-century photographs of Indian chiefs in U.S. Army officers' uniforms.