



# COLNAGHI

Mexican School, 18th Century  
*Set of Casta Paintings*

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MEXICAN SCHOOL, 18th Century

## SET OF CASTA PAINTINGS

*De Español e India, Mestiso (no. 1)*, 95.5 x 52.4 cm; 37 5/8 x 20 5/8 in.

*De Castisa y Español, Español (no. 3)*, 95.5 x 55.4 cm; 37 5/8 x 21 3/4 in.

*De Español y Negra, Mulato (no. 4)*, 96.7 x 55.3 cm; 38 1/8 x 21 3/4 in.

*De Tornatras y Español, "tente en el aire" (no. 8)*, 97.6 x 55.3 cm; 38 3/8 x 21 3/4 in.

*De Coyote e Yndia, Chanuso (no. 10)*, 97.2 x 53.4 cm; 38 1/4 x 21 in.

*De Sambaigo y Mulata, Cambujo (no. 13)*, 96 x 55.2 cm; 37 3/4 x 21 3/4 in.

*De Cambujo y Albina, "tente en el aire" (no. 14)*, 97.2 x 55.2 cm; 38 1/4 x 21 3/4 in.

*De Mulato e Yndia, Chino (no. 15)*, 97.3 x 55.4 cm; 38 1/4 x 21 3/4 in.

Oil on canvas, affixed to a lower wooden roller.

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### Provenance

Spanish private collection.

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### Reference Literature

I. Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, London and New Haven, 2004.

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## The Emergence and Meanings of *Casta* Painting in 18th-Century New Spain

In 18th-century Mexico, the pictorial genre of *casta* painting emerged as a unique artistic response to colonial society's multiethnic reality. *Casta* paintings typically appear in series (often 16 works) depicting family groups of mixed races - usually a man and woman of different ethnic origins (Spaniard, Indigenous, African, or their mixed progeny), accompanied by their child. Each canvas is inscribed with labels naming the parents' racial categories and the offspring's resultant "*casta*". This simple formula belies a remarkably complex enterprise: *casta* paintings were *simultaneously* ethnographic documents, didactic visual aids, taxonomic catalogues of human types, decorative art for elite homes, and ideological statements about colonial hierarchy. Ilona Katzew's seminal 2004 study of the genre emphasizes its polysemic nature - on one hand fitting into Enlightenment-era fascination with classifying the exotic, yet on the other reflecting a local colonial self-image and social anxieties.<sup>1</sup>

Originating in the early 1700s, *casta* paintings coincided with a period of intense colonial soul-searching. Creole elites (Spaniards born in the Americas) felt pressure to assert their status amid an increasingly mixed society and under the gaze of Spanish imperial authorities. Enlightenment science and the Bourbon reforms (instituted after 1760 by Spain's new Bourbon dynasty) encouraged the cataloguing of peoples much as one might catalogue botanical specimens. The "Sistema de Castas" - a sprawling nomenclature for mixed races - became a framework that artists could illustrate. Each successive painting in a set charts a new combination: e.g. "*De Español e India, Mestizo*" (Spaniard + Indian = Mestizo), followed by further unions such as "*Mestizo + Española = Castiza*", "*Español + Negra = Mulato*", and so on, often culminating in fancifully named types as racial mixing grows complex (terms like "*Tente en el aire*", loosely translatable with "hold-yourself-in-midair", for more elusive mixtures). Through these sequences, the genre sought to impose an orderly taxonomy on a multifaceted social spectrum. In Katzew's words, colonial elites attempted to "order an increasingly confusing society" via such images, visually freezing a fluid social reality into neatly defined categories.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of their social function and audience, many *casta* sets were commissioned by high-ranking officials or patrons and often destined for Spain or other European contexts. They catered to European curiosity about the New World's peoples and were frequently seen as export art. Indeed, *casta* paintings were largely produced for an oversea audience eager to classify and understand the colony's mixed population. In Europe, a widespread misconception held that all inhabitants of the Americas -

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<sup>1</sup> See I. Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico*, London and New Haven, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Katzew 2004, p. 93.

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even Spaniards born there - were somehow degenerate due to racial mixing and tropical climate. *Casta* images directly addressed this anxiety. By portraying a full spectrum of interracial families, they reassured viewers that a stable social order still prevailed. Typically, the series are hierarchically arranged, implicitly ranking families by their degree of “Spanishness” (whiter mixes generally placed first). Significantly, as in the present case, the first position is given to the union of a pure Spaniard with an Indigenous woman, yielding a Mestizo - a pairing often shown as peaceable and prosperous. The message is twofold: it celebrates New Spain’s ethnographic variety while affirming Spanish dominance at the top of the racial pyramid. As stressed by Katzew, *casta* painting responds to the Western anxiety by constructing a view of an orderly society bound by love hierarchically arranged with Spaniards at the top.<sup>3</sup> In these images, the *familia* itself becomes a metaphor for colonial order: father, mother, and child symbolize a society ostensibly harmonious yet strictly stratified by colour.

At the same time, *casta* paintings carried a note of Creole pride and local patriotism. They often include meticulous depictions of New World flora, foodstuffs, and costumes, effectively *cataloguing* the colony’s natural and cultural riches. As Katzew observes, many sets present New Spain as a “land of natural abundance” through precise renderings of native fruits, flora, and fauna.<sup>4</sup> These still-life details - tropical produce like papayas, cacao, or *platanos* arrayed in the scenes - also underscored the colonists’ pride in the abundance and diversity of their land. At the same time, they satisfied Europe’s appetite for the exotic: viewers in Madrid or Paris marvelled at these visual inventories of unfamiliar plants and peoples.

Beneath their charming genre scenes, *casta* paintings conveyed a clear colonial ideology about race. The pictorial narrative often suggests that mixtures involving Indigenous blood could be “repaired” or “whitened” over generations, whereas mixtures involving African ancestry led to degeneration. In other words, a person with mixed Indigenous ancestry might, after enough intermarriage with Spaniards, be accepted back as *Español*.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, one common scene (labelled “*De Castiza y Español, Español*”), as for the second painting of our series, depicts a Castiza (quarter-Indigenous woman) with a Spanish husband and their child, who is classified as *Español* - suggesting that with the “correct” mixing, Spanish blood could be restored to full purity. By contrast, when African lineage is introduced, the series implies a one-way trajectory of differentiation that prevent re-assimilation into whiteness.<sup>6</sup> Some late-series images carry pejorative or whimsical labels (*Torna atrás, Lobo, Tente en el aire*, etc.), indicating that the offspring of such unions “revert” to a lower type or float in an undefined status. This visual rhetoric

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Katzew 2004, p. 109.

<sup>5</sup> Katzew 2004, pp. 48-49.

<sup>6</sup> Katzew 2004, pp. 52 ff.

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of *advancing* or *receding* in whiteness also reflected colonial fears of social instability.

For all their overt didacticism, however, *casta* paintings were artfully contrived images, not impartial documents. They often soften or disguise the harsher aspects of the caste system through a visually engaging narrative framing. Meticulously painted costumes, lush settings, ripe fruits, and natural gestuality endow the scenes with a genial, orderly appearance. In this way, *casta* paintings made the rigid colonial caste hierarchy appear as a theatre of human variety, at once instructive and pleasing to the eye.

## ***The Colnaghi Set of Casta: A Rare Scroll-Mounted Cycle***

Our set is uniquely presented as a series of individual hanging scrolls. Each canvas is affixed to a lower wooden roller, surrounded by a painted trompe-l'œil oval frame complete with tassels, ribbons, flowers, and, at times, still-life vignettes of local produce at the base. In the *Mulato* and *Chanuso* scenes, for instance, a cluster of tropical fruit is painted at the bottom. The scroll format is rare for *casta* paintings, which were usually framed canvases. Here it likely served a portable purpose: the paintings could be rolled up and transported for display in scholarly, diplomatic, or private settings. We might imagine a colonial official or missionary unfurling these scrolls to explain New Spain's caste system to curious eyes abroad, or an elite collector keeping them as a conversation piece. The portability and scrolling mechanism introduce a performative element that enlivens the series: the ritual of display animates the narrative and lends the cycle an arresting, lived presence. Despite being anonymous works, the eight paintings show a notable compositional consistency and adherence to the established *casta* iconography. Each scene features a standardized family triad: father, mother, and young child occupy the foreground, typically arranged in a triangular grouping that allows clear interaction. The backgrounds alternate between simple domestic interiors and outdoor or marketplace settings appropriate to the depicted caste. *De Tornatras y Español*, "tente en el aire" canvas, for example, is likely to be set on a *hacienda veranda* or kitchen yard, with neutral architecture framing the trio gathered around a table, against a deep blue tropical sky. In other scenes, we glimpse a stall or shop (as in one painting where an Albina woman operates a weighing scale in what looks like a small store) with earthen jars and porcelain visible on a shelf. Setting, clothing, and activity are carefully tailored to each family's ethno-social belonging. High-caste figures appear in genteel domestic spaces, while lower-caste families might be placed in rustic outdoor environments or workplaces.

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The paintings often presented visual cues to signal ethnic identity and social rank. For instance, Spanish men are consistently depicted in elegant European dress. In the Mestizo scene, the Spanish father wears a red wool coat, blue waistcoat and a stylish tricorne hat adorned by a red ribbon, in the typical French fashion. By contrast, indigenous and mixed-race women wear attire that blends local tradition with colonial fashion. The *India* of the Mestizo painting wears a white *huipil*-style blouse, a traditional *rebozo* shawl, and a long skirt - much as elite Creole women proudly did in this period. These sartorial details were deliberately chosen to help contemporary viewers “read” the caste.

Equally telling are the occupational props included. Some paintings incorporate tools or goods associated with certain castes’ stereotyped trades: a *Sambaigo* (African-Indigenous mix) is shown carrying a tray of breads on his head, identifying him as an itinerant vendor; in one canvas, a Chino man might hold a rough basket of produce or fish, marking him as a market-labourer; the *Chanuso* carries a large ceramic jug, indicating his probable occupation as an *aguador*, or water-seller.

Within the set of eight, we see a spectrum of moods corresponding to the presumed place of each family in the racial hierarchy. The early series images (those with predominantly Spanish parentage) project domestic harmony and order. In *De Español e India, Mestizo*, the scene is one of cordial family intimacy. The elegant Spanish father smiles down to their young *mestizo* son standing between him and the *India* mother. Touches of affection - the father’s gentle gesture toward the child, the mother’s composed, attentive posture - convey an ideal of familial tenderness. The implication is that this initial mixing (Spanish with Indian) is benign, even fruitful. A similar dynamic can be observed in *De Castisa y Español, Español (no. 3)* where the elegant Spanish father is shown playing the violin to the rest of the family. By contrast, later images in the series introduce discord as the blood mixtures become “darker”. One striking canvas (labelled “*De Español y Negra, Mulato*”) flips the tranquil family ideal into a scene of domestic strife. A Spanish man is depicted recoiling in alarm as his *Negra* (African-descended) partner lunges toward him in fury - one hand clutching his hair while the other brandishes a cooking utensil as a weapon. The *Mulato* child cowers at the mother’s skirts, crying. Around them, a kitchen scene lies in chaos. This violent vignette is not an anomaly in *casta* painting; rather, it follows a convention whereby unions involving black people were sometimes shown as tumultuous or degraded, to underscore colonial prejudices. The imagery bluntly suggests that when a Spanish man mixes with an African woman, the result is a breakdown of social and gender order. It is a visual dramatization of the era’s racist notion that African blood engendered unruliness and quick degradation. Indeed, the genre’s intrigue lies in this interplay of content and form: the taxonomy of race is delivered through engaging genre scenes that could be appreciated as conversation pieces. Our scroll-mounted set encapsulates this dynamic.

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Stylistically, Colnaghi's scroll *casta* paintings align with mid-18th-century developments in the genre. The artist - though unidentified - was clearly aware of the models established by leading Mexican painters of the era, such as Juan Rodríguez Juárez (1675-1728), José de Ibarra (1685-1756), Miguel Cabrera (1710-1768), and Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz (1713-1772). The overall format of a calm family portrait in a shallow space was pioneered in early sets by Rodríguez Juárez (c. 1715) and Ibarra, who introduced the convention of depicting the *castas* as parent-child groupings engaged in domestic interaction (Figs. 1-2).<sup>7</sup> Likewise, the didactic clarity and balanced arrangement of the figures reflect the standard set by Miguel Cabrera, whose celebrated 1763 *casta* series for the Viceroy of New Spain epitomised the genre's academic polish (see for example Figs. 3-4). While the execution in these scroll paintings is somewhat more elementary and naïve than Cabrera's technique, the iconography closely follows established prototypes. Such correspondences suggest the painter of this series borrowed from prints or knowledge of well-known *casta* works.

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<sup>7</sup> Katzew 2004, p. 16.

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Fig. 1. Juan Rodríguez Juárez, Mestizo and Indian produce Coyote, ca. 1715, oil on canvas, 103.8 × 146.4 cm. New York, The Hispanic Society of America.

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Fig. 2. Attributed to José de Ibarra. *From Spaniard and Mulatta, Morisca (De español y de mulata, morisca)*, c. 1730. New York, Metropolitan Museum.

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Fig. 3-4. Miguel Cabrera, 6. *From Spaniard and Morisca, Albino Girl* (6. *De español y morisca, albina*), 1763, oil on canvas, 131.1 x 105.1 cm, Los Angeles County Museum of Art); right: Miguel Cabrera, 7. *From Spaniard and Albino, Return-Backwards* (7. *De español y albino, torna atrás*), 1763, oil on canvas, 132 x 101 cm, Mexico, private collection.

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