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JOSE MARIA LOPEZ MEZQUITA
(Granada 1883 - 1924 Madrid)

*CHINITA (PORTRAIT OF LA PERLA NEGRA),
1924*

Oil on canvas
142 x 110 cm; 55 7/8 x 43 1/4 in.

Signed lower left 'LOPEZ MEZQUITA'.

Provenance

Private collection, Madrid.

Literature

F. J. Pérez Rojas, *Lopez Mezquita, 1893-1954: Epocas e Itinerarios de un Pintor Cosmopolita. De Granada a Nueva York*, 2007, pp. 291-292.

Exhibition

Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes, Madrid, 1924, no. 286, p. 34.

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Chinita, painted by José María López Mezquita in 1924 is an oil portrait of the Afro-Cuban dancer known as “La Perla Negra.” It was first unveiled that same year at the “Exposición Nacional de Bellas Artes” (National Exhibition of Fine Arts) in Madrid, listed as entry number 286 on page 34 of the catalogue. On that occasion, its author was awarded a third-class medal for the work. The painting presents the figure three-quarter length, standing with one hand on her hip in a confident pose. She stands as if she were acting on stage, illuminated by the electric spotlights. The lighting is dramatic yet naturalistic: a clear, steady light falls on the subject’s face and upper body, highlighting the sheen of her garment and the sculptural form of her figure, while the background remains in shadow. She wears a revealing patterned satin gown or shawl with bold, colorful motifs, and an ornate headdress reminiscent of an exotic fan or tiara. A delicate crucifix necklace adds a symbolic touch, acting as a reminder of a storied past of colonial catholicisation of indigenous people. The dark complexion of the subject and her sensual costume immediately draw the eye. López Mezquita renders her with a realist precision and vitality that are hallmarks of his portrait style. A contemporary critic noted that López Mezquita’s works are “dotadas de nervio y de vida” (“endowed with nerve and life”). Indeed, in *Chinita*, the sitter’s direct gaze and poised stance convey a strong sense of personality and presence. The painting is analysed in F. J. Pérez Rojas’ 2007 publication *López Mezquita, 1893-1954: Epocas e Itinerarios de un Pintor Cosmopolita. De Granada a Nueva York*, where it was initially considered missing.¹ The work was also recognized by contemporary critic José Francés as a unique and exotic contribution to the National Exhibition of Fine Arts. He later referenced *Chinita* in López Mezquita’s induction speech at the Academy of Fine Arts as a testament to his artistic prowess.

Stylistically, *Chinita* reflects López Mezquita’s grounding in the Spanish portraiture tradition combined with modern influences. A disciple of Cecilio Plá and José Larrocha, and a graduate of the prestigious San Fernando Royal Academy of Fine Arts, López Mezquita received numerous gold and silver medals at major European and American art exhibitions. He was often described as a spiritual descendant of Velázquez and Goya, due to his command of realism, psychologically incisive characterizations, and mastery of atmosphere. In *Chinita*, one can detect the Velazquean influence in the restrained, tonal background and honest depiction of the subject, as well as Goya’s legacy in the directness of the gaze. Yet López Mezquita was also attuned to contemporary trends – his brushwork, while refined, has a fluent, painterly quality, and his color palette is rich and modern. The loose, broad handling of the patterned wrap in *Chinita* demonstrates a confident impressionistic brushstroke, suggesting movement and texture rather than delineating every detail. This approach may owe something to his teacher Cecilio Plá (known for impressionist colorism) and to the broader post-Impressionist and Belle

¹ F. J. Pérez Rojas, *López Mezquita, 1893-1954: Epocas e Itinerarios de un Pintor Cosmopolita. De Granada a Nueva York*, 2007, pp. 291-292.

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Époque portrait trends in Europe, led by the like of Giovanni Boldini and John Singer Sargent. Art historian José Francés lauded López Mezquita as “absolutamente moderno en...como llena de luz y aire sus cuadros” (“absolutely modern in how he fills his paintings with light and air”). In *Chinita*, this modern sensibility comes through in the bright illumination of the figure against an airy, indistinct backdrop, lending the portrait a fresh, contemporary aura rather than a stiff formalism.

Chinita must be understood in the context of early 20th-century Spain’s encounters with Black and Afro-Caribbean culture. In the 1910s and 1920s, Spain - like much of Europe - experienced a growing fascination with Afro-Caribbean and African American performers, jazz music, and new dance forms. An Afro-Cuban performer named Dulce María Morales Cervantes, known by her stage name *La Perla Negra* (“The Black Pearl”), was a pioneer of this cultural wave (Figs. 1-4).



Figs. 1-2. Historical images of María Morales Cervantes, *La Perla Negra*

She arrived in Spain in 1913 and is considered “muy probablemente, una de las primeras mujeres afroamericanas que bailó en un teatro en España en el siglo XX” (“very likely one of the first Afro-American women to dance on a Spanish stage in the 20th century”). *La Perla Negra* toured cities like Madrid, Sevilla, and Córdoba, astounding audiences with dances that combined tropical rhythms and modern styles. Her repertoire included cakewalks, modern dance numbers, rumbas, and even pieces of classical dance, which introduced Spanish audiences to new movements and musical syncopations. This was the era when jazz and the so-called “*danzas de los negros*” were captivating Europe; performers of African descent became emblems of modernity and exotic allure in visual culture. By 1924, when López Mezquita painted *Chinita*, *La Perla Negra* had been performing in Spain for over a decade and “arrasaba en los teatros de Madrid de la época” (“was taking Madrid’s theaters by storm at the time”). The

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emergence of such performers offered new visual iconography for artists: the image of the confident Black female dancer became a symbol of modern urban nightlife, jazz music, and the blending of cultures.



Figs. 3-4. Historical images of María Morales Cervantes, *La Perla Negra*

The title itself adds another layer of exoticism, conflating Asian and Afro-Caribbean motifs in line with the period's fascination for *lo exótico*. Essentially, the painting positions its subject at the intersection of multiple "Others" - Black, Caribbean, possibly styled with Asian attributes - that captivated European imaginations. A key comparison to gauge *Chinita*'s cultural context is Julio Romero de Torres' depictions of Black women around the same era. Romero de Torres, a contemporary of Mezquita, was known for his symbolist portraits of women in Córdoba. In the 1920s he painted a work commonly referred to as *La Perla Negra* (c. 1926, Fig. 5), representing the same Afro-Cuban dancer whom López Mezquita painted in *Chinita*. Crucially, both *Chinita* and Romero's *La Perla Negra* are among the very few depictions of Black women in early 20th-century Spanish painting. Their existence points to a slight shift in cultural attitudes: Black and *mulatta* women were becoming muses for artists, emblematic of a new, cosmopolitan era.



Figs. 5. Romero de Torres, *La Perla Negra*, c. 1926, private collection.