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Buenaventura José Guiol
(Mexico, second half of the 18th
century)

Five Casta Paintings, 1777

oil on canvas

all 62.3 x 55.2 cm.; 24.5 x 21.7 in.



Provenance

Minguela Family Collection, Spain.

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Casta Painting is the most fascinating pictorial genre in Mexican art history. Born in New Spain at the beginning of the 18th century and, most likely, died out towards the end of that century, certainly before the advent of Mexican independence in 1821.

Casta paintings or paintings of *mestizaje* unions, typically produced using oil on canvas or, on some occasions, on copper, consist of a series of images representing the racial mixes arising in New Spain from three primary racial groups: Spaniards, American Indians and Blacks, giving rise to numerous types. Some fifty possibilities have been counted.¹ A typical series covers sixteen basic types although the largest known series comprises twenty paintings. *Casta* paintings usually depicted a couple (a mother and father) in which each is a member of a different racial group, and they are accompanied by a small child. Texts alluding to the designations assigned to each individual are included.

To better understand the concept of *Casta*, it must be traced back to the Mexican conquest in the first part of the 16th century. From the beginning of the viceroyalty, there were numerous cases of stable relationships between the *conquistadors* and Indian women which, according to the scholar Pilar Gonzalbo Aizpuru, could not be considered the fruit of force since “they were established from the outset as or subsequently drifted towards the constitution of what was a true family”.² In addition, during the Viceroyalty, the civil legislative framework was relatively lax and always facilitated the institutionalization of relationships between couples who were not necessarily married and the subsequent legitimization of the offspring.³

In fact, the laws on Indians from the Spanish monarchy allowed, right from the beginning of the conquest of the New World, mixed marriage between Spaniards and the indigenous people. as illustrated in the following provision:

“It is by our will that male and female Native Americans have, as they should, full freedom to marry whomever they wish, thus with Indians as with natives of these Kingdoms of ours, or Spaniards, born in the Indies, without this being an impediment. And we stipulate that no order of ours, that has been given, or shall be given, may impede or prevent the marriage among the Indians with male and female Spaniards, and that they have complete freedom to

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marry whomever they wish, and our Courts to ensure that this is kept and fulfilled” (Real Cédula de Felipe II, on October 19th, 1514, ratified in 1515 and in 1556, and included in the *Recopilación de las Leyes de Indias* [Compilation of Laws of the Indies] from 1680, Sixth Book, First Heading, Law II) (fig. 1).

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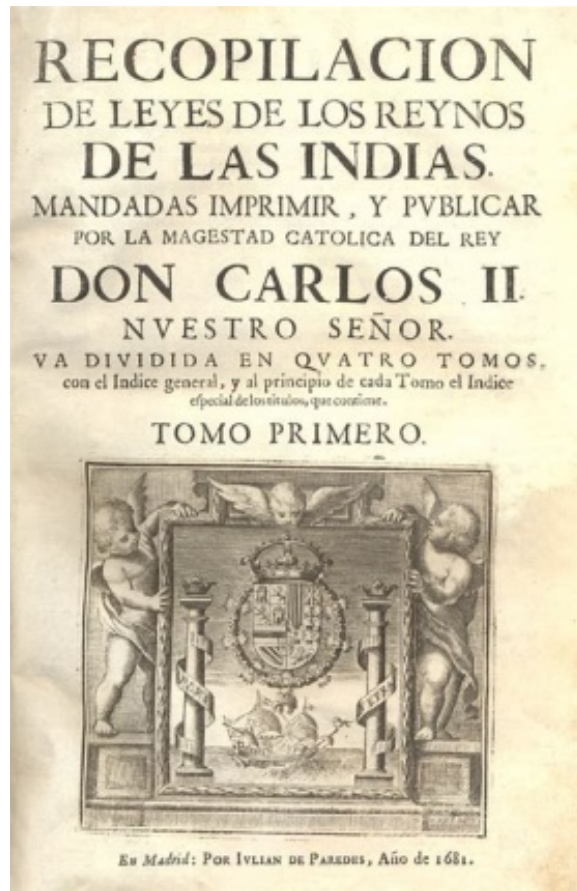


Figure 1. Julián de Paredes, *Recopilación de leyes de los Reynos de las Indias*, 1681.
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De Español y Mestiza nace Castiza (Fruit of Spanish male and Mestiza, Castiza), 1777

This family group is made up of a Spanish father, who is leaning above his daughter in baby walker, a little servant, and a Mestiza mother who is handing over a bracelet. The scene takes place inside of an elegant house. On the right, there is a piece of paper attached to the wall as a painting with the number 2 and a text identifying the scene “De Español y Mestiza nace Castiza”.

Our collection starts with this painting number 2 of the series.⁴ It would hardly be surprising for other works by the artist to come to light thanks to the identification of this new set of casta works, thereby completing the series and leading to a reevaluation of the collection.

The elevated social status of the group is made explicit by the richness of the attire and the presence of a Black servant elegantly dressed and holding the little Castiza girl's baby walker. The great beauty and harmony of the domestic group is not reminiscent of any known prototype, and may be Guiol's own invention. The faces of the children are close to the style of José de Páez.

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De Español y Morisca nace Albina (Fruit of Spanish male and Morisca, Albina), 1777

In the interior of an elegant house, this family painting portrays a Spanish father, a Morisca mother and their little Albina daughter.

The Spaniard is writing and is interrupted by the mother who brings him the daughter, at which time the father takes the opportunity to give her an object that seems to be a bracelet. In the lower background we see an archway with a servant carrying a tray of food, and another servant asking her to share it with him.

The homely atmosphere of the scene is highlighted by the clothes worn by the Spanish father; he is dressed in a banyan, a typical long men's coat almost reaching the feet, and a white cap, clothing that was only worn in the house. Banyans used to be made of chintz, cotton printed with Chinese drawings transported to America through the Nao de Acapulco, bearing witness to the extensive trade links between Asia and Mexico. This type of garment is depicted in many casta paintings, demonstrating that such models were common among the painters of the time. This work sees Guiol sticking close to the prototype and revisiting compositions characteristic of Cabrera, Páez and Magón. Let us not forget that a guild system existed in 18th-century Mexico, which explains why various artists repeated similar models.

In the foreground we see a piece of paper on the floor with the number Seven for the series and a text identifying the scene "De Español y Morisca nace Albina". In the lower right-hand corner, on a kind of bench seat, the painter's proud signature is to be found, reading "Bonaventura Jose Guiol fecit Mexico año de 1777".

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De Loba e Indio nace Zambaigo (Fruit of an Indian and a Loba, Zambaigo), 1777

A scene of great beauty set indoors with the background separated by a lattice and a large window, with the family grouped around the work of the father who is sitting patching shoes next to a table where several of the tools of his trade are visible. To the left his wife prepares a meal while their son completes the scene sitting on the ground beating leather. The dark skin woman is wearing jewelry, a pearl necklace and fine matching earrings. At first glance, such extravagant and elaborate jewelry may seem exaggerated given the domestic setting, but the abundance of pearls in the American seas made their use in jewelry across all social classes during the viceregal era.

The explanatory note with the series number is located on a piece of paper pinned to the right-hand wall, with the number 10, "De Loba e Indio nace Zambaigo".

Although Guiol sticks to the norm, and the scene is very similar to those depicted by other painters from the second half of the 18th century, portraying trades with the same shelves and molds with shoes hanging down, certain details, like the still life of the kitchen scene or the ceramic jug resting on the windowsill, show us an interesting and well-versed artist. This piece is associated with the so-called "Tonalá ceramics", whose main feature was a glossy finish effected through a characteristic burnishing process which, in contrast to pre-Hispanic pottery, started to be popular following the Spanish settlement due to the workshops set up by the religious orders which, in addition to their evangelizing activities, taught new Spanish techniques. The prominence given to these clay pieces means that they appear in numerous still-life paintings by the greatest specialists of the time. In their still lifes, the Spaniards Van der Hamen and Antonio de Pereda often depicted containers that are directly related to Mexican red ceramics. Guiol uses the jug to lend depth to the scene, which is opened up via a window to the outside.

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De Cambujo y Mulata nace Albarazo (Fruit of Cambujo and Mulatta, Albarazo), 1777

An outdoors scene that changed the rich clothing of the upper classes for the simple threadbare dress of a couple and a boy walking barefoot near a river. In the background, a boat scene with an elegant couple singing and playing the guitar contrasts with the main scene of the Cambujo and the Mulatta. The further one gets from White Spanish, the greater the poverty—particularly in works dating from the second half of the 18th century. The characters don't even have a home, seeming to wander carrying all their possessions with them. Their son looks at them doubtfully, caught between the choice of carrying on walking with them or stopping where he is. As we have seen, family scenes in the *casta* painting genre usually take place in the domestic sphere or in its immediate surroundings. It is as such that this outdoors painting might be attempting to convey the idea that the *castas* represented (Cambujo, Mulatta and Albarazo) live on the margins of society with no fixed abode, like vagabonds. The explanatory note with the series number is located on a piece of paper with the number twelve, “De Cambujo y Mulata nace Albarazado”.

The landscape is reminiscent of other works by Guiol. It resembles a theatrical scene with musicians singing, very similar to European artists in the Rococo style. All of this seems to point to the need, with regards the *casta* paintings genre, for further research into the relationship these works might have with the courtship scenes of M. A. Housse or Paret y Alcázar.

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De China y Negro nace Genisara (Fruit of Negro and China, Genisara), 1777

The last painting to comment on and the one that concludes the series is the number 16. As we mentioned earlier, this is a typical number of paintings for these series. The work depicts a couple in the midst of a quarrel. The man is attacking the woman, grabbing her by the hair and wielding a knife. The woman is defending herself by pulling the man's hair and holding a wooden spoon as a weapon. The little girl is grabbing at her father's leg in an attempt to separate the couple.

Because of the quarrel, the small table full of pottery lost its balance and fell to the ground, as if the painter wanted to capture the moment. scene looks like a balancing act between the couple, and while the other works from the series speak of marital harmony and understanding, this scene transports us to a universe of quarrelling and hardship. The harshness of this scene of domestic violence surprises us in an artist such as Guiol, who depicted the good side of society. Yet he, like many of his contemporaries, also dares to portray subjects that must have been regular occurrences in most countries, however little pictorial evidence there may be.

The work, signed and dated in Mexico in 1777, sticks to the *casta* genre prototype and draws this fascinating series to a close.

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Footnotes

¹ T. Castelló Yturbide, 'La Indumentaria de las Castas del Mestizaje', in *Artes de México*, no. 8, Summer 1900, pp. 73 - 79; citing N. León, *Las castas del México Colonial o Nueva España*, México 1924.

² P. Gonzalbo Aizpuru, 'La familia y las familias en el México colonial', in *Estudios Sociológicos*, vol. 10, no. 30, 1992, Ed. El Colegio de México, 1992, p. 698.

³ "With everything, the presence of illegitimate children was on the increase over the years, so that during the 17th Century in the city of Guadalajara, illegitimate children accounted for 40, 60 and 50 percent of the total number baptized" (P. Eduardo Cruz, *op. cit.*, pp. 707 and 708, citing T. Calvo, *La Nueva Galicia en los siglos XVI v XVII*, Guadalajara, El Colegio de Jalisco/CEMCA, pp. 65-68). Also: "Because for one hundred years there were no restrictions against mixed race and mulattos in the Real Universidad de México, nor were there stringent demands for legitimacy" (P. Gonzalbo, *op. cit.*, p. 708).

⁴ Number 1 often refer to pure Native Indians or more commonly, *De Español e India, Mestiza*. A single case is known in a painting in the Museo de América de Madrid that alludes to the mixture of *Española e Indio, Mestizo*. Although, as noted in the introduction, in the nomenclature of the castes there are no exact rules.