

Framing the Botanical: Picturing Nature and Painting the Castas of Eighteenth-Century Mexico

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The tradition of *casta* painting is one of the most captivating—and enigmatic—artistic genres from Mexico’s colonial period. Typically painted as a series of sixteen separate canvases, the first sets began to appear during the reign of Spanish King Phillip V (1700-46), and production grew in variation and circulation throughout the remainder of the eighteenth century. Currently, at least a hundred partial or full *casta* sets have been accounted for and more continue to surface—attesting to their overwhelming popularity during the period.¹

The myriad of *casta* paintings executed during this period can be seen as an attempt to visualize the complex process of *mestizaje* (race mixing) that occurred among the three most prominent ethnic groups in the Spanish American colonies: Spaniards, Indians, and Africans. These paintings almost always depict a mother, father, and child—each representing a different racial category found within the *sistema de castas* (racial lineages) acknowledged by, and conceived in, colonial society. Primarily commissioned by elite Spaniards and executed by New Spanish painters, many sets were sent to the Royal History Cabinet in Madrid to be exhibited. *Casta* paintings were thus being produced largely for overseas consumption.² Existing somewhere between export item and colonial artifact, these paintings sparked an interest among the Spanish public for exotic objects from its American empire.³

The focus of this paper is to emphasize how such a curious and foreign audience might have read these paintings. Historian Magnus Mörner saw *casta* paintings primarily as “products of a few intellectual artists.”⁴ In this brief analysis of a *casta* series by Miguel Cabrera, this paper not only agrees

with Mörner, but argues that Cabrera, and other artists working in the second half of the century, were also painting for a highly intellectual audience, a particular audience that, during the Enlightenment, would have been well-versed in understanding the visual conventions that make up *casta* paintings and other pictures intended to diagram and better understand not only the natural world, but that which was foreign, exotic, and not easily reduced to written description. Considering this, the tradition of natural history and the practice of botanical illustration will be examined with regard to the similarities, both visual and theoretical, that they share with *casta* painting.

In Spain, the eighteenth century was the golden age of transatlantic exploratory surveys and the plant illustrations they produced—a consequence of European botanical practices that were dominated by the work of Swedish taxonomist Carl Linnaeus (1707-78).⁵ While it is known that interests stemming from taxonomic classification (the sole purpose of botanical illustration) and a larger “culture of curiosity” dominated European mentalities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, little has been pursued in terms of connecting Spanish participation in this cultural exchange with the development of *casta* painting.⁶ Art historian Daniela Bleichmar has demonstrated that, in eighteenth-century Spain, images were the privileged media for embodying and transporting both the object of an observation and the observation itself—an insight applicable and relevant to the status of *casta* sets as export items to Europe.⁷

The majority of art historical scholarship on *casta* painting does not focus on Enlightenment taxonomic systems, or the status of *casta* sets as export items, as an explanation for

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¹ Susan Deans-Smith, “Creating the Colonial Subject: Paintings, Collectors, and Critics in Eighteenth-Century Mexico and Spain,” *Colonial Latin American Review* 14 (2005): 169.

² Nina M. Scott, “Measuring Ingredients: Food and Domesticity in Mexican *Casta* Paintings,” *Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture* 5 (2005): 73.

³ María Concepción García Sáiz, *Las castas mexicanas: Un género pictórico Americano* (Milan: Olivetti, 1989), 47-49.

⁴ Magnus Mörner, *Race Mixture in the History of Latin America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), 59.

⁵ Martyn Rix, *The Art of the Botanist* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1981), 78.

⁶ Ken Arnold, “Trade, travel, and treasure: Seventeenth-century artificial curiosities,” in *Transports, Travel, Pleasure and Imaginative Geography, 1600-1830*, ed. Chloe Chard and Helen Langdon (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 266.

⁷ Daniela Bleichmar, “The Geography of Observation: Distance and Visibility in Eighteenth-Century Botanical Travel,” in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, ed. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011), 376.

the genre's development or its content.⁸ However, it should be noted that these systems and the transatlantic practices they inspired are only being considered with regard to the human figures found in these paintings. It is the overall goal of this paper to suggest that these paintings are fundamentally concerned with diagramming—not only interracial coupling and its idealized reality—but human reproduction and biological sexual systems as they were beginning to be understood in the eighteenth century. Considering the visual conventions of botanical illustration—via Linnaean botany—this paper will reframe the botanical imagery found in *casta* paintings in a manner that forges a relationship between both the natural products and human figures that share countless compositions.

It is not difficult to surmise the unprecedented level of interest *casta* paintings would have produced for any eighteenth-century audience given the amount of visual information they contain. Consider a *casta* painting credited to Luis de Mena from the middle of the century that not only attempts to summarize the *sistema de castas*, but features depictions of the Virgin of Guadalupe, fruits native to the New World, and famous Mexico City landmarks (Figure 1). The majority of the canvas, and the central area of its composition, illustrates the progressive dilution of “pure” Spanish, Indian, and African blood via the presentation of family groupings. Neatly compartmentalized and arranged in two rows of four, eight lavishly dressed, interracial couples are shown with their consequent offspring in a chart-like manner—while inscriptions set beneath each grouping identify the racial classification of each figure.⁹

Often discounted in the reading of this image is the entire bottom third of the composition—a portion dedicated exclusively to presenting fruits and vegetables found in the Americas. In this clearly delineated register of the painting more than a dozen visually identifiable fruits and plants are shown. Placed against the background of an unarticulated interior much like the *casta* scenes above, this grouping produces relatively dynamic properties. The fruits shown here are not only numbered, but also arranged alphabetically in a keyed inscription placed directly beneath them. Additionally, by varying the proportion, color, and texture of these fruits in an appropriately scaled space, de Mena creates several visually stimulating illusions.

At the forefront, a sliced pineapple and flower are placed as if tumbling over the edge of the scene and out of

the painting. Also immediately recognizable, carefully sliced, and precariously positioned on display is an avocado. As if simultaneously collected from larger, pre-existing traditions of both still life painting and botanical illustration, the fruits found in de Mena's painting produce an odd, yet mesmerizing, effect. Additionally, as opposed to the *castas* presented above, the fruits depicted here can be viewed as illustrations of actual, individualized objects that exist in nature—an observation that might explain the presence of botanical imagery in this, and other, *casta* paintings.

Much like botanical illustrations, *casta* paintings imply that knowledge of the natural world can be visually contained in a network of signs, symbols, and representational conventions—despite the reality of what is being depicted.¹⁰ This implication comes from the fact that both *casta* painters and plant illustrators were working from two separate models that gave way to practices codified in pictorial conventions that remained largely unchanged throughout the century—the *sistema de castas* and Linnaeus's taxonomic system, respectively. In order to frame the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of eighteenth-century Mexico and Spain, a visual examination of the pictures these models inspired is necessary.

In the time period between Charles III's accession to the Spanish throne in 1759 and Spain's invasion by Napoleon in 1808, a total of fifty-seven scientific expeditions were mounted by the Spanish Crown to investigate the natural history of the Americas—every single one of which employed artists who produced a staggering number of botanical illustrations.¹¹ It is also of interest to note that by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Spanish Crown had imposed the Linnaean system on all botanical practices, including New World expeditions.¹² Natural history practices also collided with the larger European “culture of curiosity” that inspired the production of encyclopedic travel manuscripts not necessarily or officially associated with the Spanish Crown. Regardless, all of these works aimed to document certain visible realities of the New World for a particular European audience.

A botanical illustration of an avocado (Figure 2) comes from the chapter on the “Trees, Fruits, Birds, and Animals” of New Spain from one such manuscript commissioned by Spanish merchant Pedro Alonso O'Crouley in 1774.¹³ O'Crouley, who was not only a renowned art collector but a well known member of various scientific societies in Eu-

⁸ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 203.

⁹ Not all *casta* paintings fit the basic design scheme that has come to characterize the genre. Uncommon, but not unique, are *casta* paintings such as de Mena's that arrange multiple *casta* scenes on a single compartmentalized surface that illustrates a typology of races together. There are also other instances in which *castas* are presented alongside or within city views, usually labeled as market scenes.

¹⁰ Antonio Lafuente and Nuria Valverde, “Linnaean Botany and Spanish Imperial Biopolitics,” in *Colonial Botany: Science, Commerce, and*

Politics in the Early Modern World, ed. Londa Schiebinger and Claudia Swan (Philadelphia: University of Philadelphia Press, 2005), 134.

¹¹ Daniela Bleichmar, *Visible Empire: Botanical Expeditions & Visual Culture in the Hispanic Enlightenment* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 18.

¹² Lafuente and Valverde, “Linnaean Botany,” 136.

¹³ O'Crouley, Pedro Alonso, *A Description of the Kingdom of New Spain* (Dublin: Allen Figgis, 1972), 23. This chapter is the eighth of twenty-nine total chapters, and four appendixes, that make up this manuscript.

rope, had the manuscript made to be added to his already existing cabinet of curiosities in Spain.¹⁴ The end product includes written and visual accounts of Mexico's geography, government, local products, and even pre-Conquest history. The manuscript also includes illustrated renditions of *casta* paintings.¹⁵

Figure 2 was created by an anonymous artist and utilizes the key conventions of botanical illustration, the most standard feature being the de-contextualization, or total isolation, of the depicted specimen on a blank (usually white) background.¹⁶ The illustration is also monochromatic, although this was not a general rule so much as a style.¹⁷ Suspended in the middle of the composition, two branches from an avocado tree are rendered as if having just been cut from the larger plant. One branch contains only leaves while the other holds the growing buds of the fruit as well as a single, ripe, avocado. Directly beneath this, one half of the same fruit is shown—carefully sliced open and pitted. A pit from the fruit is positioned to the right of this and stands on end.

Simply dissected and placed before the viewer, the avocado's affected presentation points to a sort of process that is fleshed out, seemingly from beginning to end. This process is a fundamental element of Linnaean botany because it is representative of the sexual systems on which the practice is founded. Here, the branch and buds of the avocado plant would have indicated, to the eighteenth-century viewer, that from which one came. It would have also indicated that the natural process diagrammed here is cyclical—that planting the avocado's seed would continually yield the same product.

Considering this, it would be beneficial to note the presentation of the avocado found in de Mena's *casta* painting. Despite the similarities to the avocado depicted for O'Crouley, the largest difference appears to be a visual one. It may be of interest to ask: what can the white space and isolated qualities of the botanical illustration accomplish that de Mena's rendition cannot? Or asked in reverse, what does the treatment of the avocado in a *casta* painting allow for that the conventions of botanical illustration purposefully avoid?

For both practices, and the natural specimens they present, context is key. According to French historian and social theorist Michel Foucault, the white space of botanical illustrations would have recalled the then recent invention of the microscope, an instrument whose optics would have been familiar to the target audience of scientific illustrations:

¹⁴ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 189.

¹⁵ O'Crouley, *Description of the Kingdom*, 17. Due to their abbreviated nature, an example of these *casta* paintings is not included here. However, it may be of importance to note that many of the *castas* in O'Crouley's work are also depicted alongside natural products.

¹⁶ Gill Saunders, *Picturing Plants: An Analytical History of Botanical Illustration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 15.

¹⁷ *Ibid.* The two basic styles in botanical illustration are the illusionistic pictorial representation (generally colored) and the outline schematic

wealthy, educated men in Europe.¹⁸ For the first time, the ability to magnify, isolate, and separate entirely the object of one's study was made readily available. Here, the biologist's petri dish is made comparable to the white paper of the artist's sketchbook. In this sense, isolation of the botanical allowed for an easier (and solely visual) dissection, examination, and classification of the natural world.

In *casta* paintings, however, the inclusion of the botanical alongside human figures complicates what other, alternative function depictions of natural products may have represented to their original audience. One could argue that the inclusion of these products may have acted to compliment and help explain the more unique, not easily understood, aspects of *mestizaje*—by attempting to diagram the inherently sexual relationship depicted in *casta* paintings.

Their inclusion was certainly a conscious decision on behalf of Miguel Cabrera, one of the most celebrated and renowned New Spanish painters of the eighteenth century. During his lifetime, he was not only recognized as the greatest painter in all of New Spain, but also considered to be among the most educated and culturally informed men of his day.¹⁹ Thus, it is safe to assume that Cabrera would have been familiar with the practice of botanical illustration and its visual conventions. In fact, a number of his paintings confirm this assumption. In his noteworthy *casta* set from 1763, fruits, plants, and vegetables are consistently placed in the foreground of the image.

Typically situated in the lower left or right corners of the image and on top of a raised platform, the fruits and vegetables presented in his series are few in number and unique in their exclusivity to certain racial mixtures. No two canvases in this set utilize the same, or even similar, botanical combinations in their composition. Thus, one could argue that Cabrera both selected and carefully depicted these products to aid the viewer in defining the human figures they appear alongside.

In the first canvas from this set, *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestiza* (Figure 3), the gap between human figure and botanical specimen is closed dramatically. The depicted offspring (a *mestiza*) is not only placed directly next to the labeled pineapple but holds a slice of the fruit in her right hand. The slice both mimics the pleats in her dress and indicates that she has taken a bite of the fruit. In a way, this interaction shifts the pineapple's status from dissected natural specimen to actively consumed agricultural product.

representation (generally monochromatic). Although a colored image conveys different information from a monochromatic outline, neither is necessarily considered better than the other. For example, while color might aid the purposes of a gardener or amateur botanist, the supposed clarity afforded an outlined drawing would better suit a scientist studying plant morphology.

¹⁸ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 133.

¹⁹ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 17.

Given the importance of racial hierarchy to *casta* painting, it is worth mentioning that in Spanish America the pineapple (inscribed here with the word “Piña”) was associated with the wealthy Spanish elite—a direct nod to the *mestiza*’s clearly stated racial origin.²⁰

The presentation of this fruit also lends itself to comparison with the sliced pineapple in de Mena’s painting. In both cases a whole pineapple, indicated by the leaves on its crown, is situated behind a sliced fragment of the same fruit whose upper segment is not accounted for. It is seemingly common knowledge for modern viewers that, growing a pineapple plant only requires planting the top portion of the leafy side of the fruit directly in fertilized soil. However, it is problematic to assume the same for an eighteenth-century audience, particularly one that was most likely European and probably unfamiliar with the plant. Additionally, while it is odd that two of the same fruit are shown, the inclusion recalls the sexual process visually diagrammed in botanical illustrations. Is it possible, then, that both pineapples are to be understood as a single entity at different stages of a similarly sexual process? How, too, is this notion complicated by the depicted *mestiza*’s explicit consumption of the pineapple in this manner?

A similar treatment is provided in Cabrera’s depiction of an avocado in the fifth canvas of this set, *From Spaniard and Mulatto, Morisca* (Figure 4). An avocado is carefully sliced open and placed on the edge of the platform on which the depicted offspring (a *morisca*) stands. Due to its situation on the corner of this pedestal the avocado appears as if it is about to tumble off the edge of the platform. Inscribed on the lip of the pedestal, just below the two halves, is the word “aguacate.” Behind this avocado and situated in the shadows caused by the surrounding figures is yet another avocado.

Compared to de Mena’s representation of this fruit and the botanical illustration from O’Crouley’s manuscript, a standard format for depicting an avocado can be outlined. Like the pineapple in the previous canvas, this avocado is whole and seems to function as an alternative view of the same specimen—one that shows the fruit in its entirety. Like the pineapple, the means by which one grows an avocado (the pit that remains in its right half) is displayed yet again. However, in this scene the human figure does not interact with the fruit aside from standing on the same, raised surface.

The same cannot be said for the figure depicted in the seventh canvas, *From Spaniard and Albino, Return-Backwards* (Figure 5). Similar to the *mestiza* shown before, here, too, the offspring (a return-backwards) is shown as if in the act of

consuming the product that foregrounds the composition. Presented on the platform in the foreground of the scene are two different plants that are not labeled but appear in multiple parts. However, it is not too much of a stretch to assume that the fruit on top is a tamarind. Jumbled together on the edge of the pedestal they also appear as if they could fall off of the stand and out of the painting at any moment. Placed at the top of this heap are two bean stems: one that is carefully sliced lengthwise in half rests on top of the other, whole stem.

The tamarind that is splayed open appears to be missing its beans. In this regard, it is important to note that the represented offspring holds a small bowl filled with what appear to be the missing seeds from the bean stem on display. As with the previously discussed pineapple and avocado, the seed from which one is able to cultivate the larger plant is prominently featured. However, the child in this canvas forges a more direct connection with the diagrammed process by taking part in the consumption. In considering Linnaean botanical practices, this action raises questions similar to those posed by the *mestiza* who consumes a pineapple slice in the first canvas. How does the represented offspring enter into the sexual process that is so carefully diagrammed here?

Returning to de Mena’s *casta* painting, a new reading can be proposed—from the bottom, upward—that frames the botanical suggestions presented here in a manner that forges a relationship between both the natural products and human figures that share this composition. Somewhere in this medley of fruits, plants, and vegetables there may exist a botanical combination, or suitable referent, for each of the *casta* groupings situated above, helping to articulate the complex (yet entirely natural) process that inspired an entire artistic genre.

By considering the practice and art of botanical illustration in relation to the genre of *casta* painting, this paper has attempted to highlight the importance of pictorial conventions to an eighteenth-century audience. In this regard, a common ground has been established and the intersection between these two practices explored. *Casta* painting may very well be the visual manifestation of two, quasi-scientific ordering theories that demonstrated an overwhelming degree of influence during the eighteenth century. If not, and at the very least, the unprecedented amount of visual information present in *casta* sets is certainly part of a larger discourse on how to order and explain the natural world.

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²⁰ Ilona Katzew, *New World Orders: Casta Painting and Colonial Latin America* (New York: Americas Society Art Gallery, 1996), 21. The pineapple is noted for being among the fruits that interested Spaniards most. This is probably because it was known that a form of the fruit

was sent to Spain in the early sixteenth century for King Ferdinand; reputedly upon tasting it, he claimed it was superior in taste to all other fruits from Mexico.

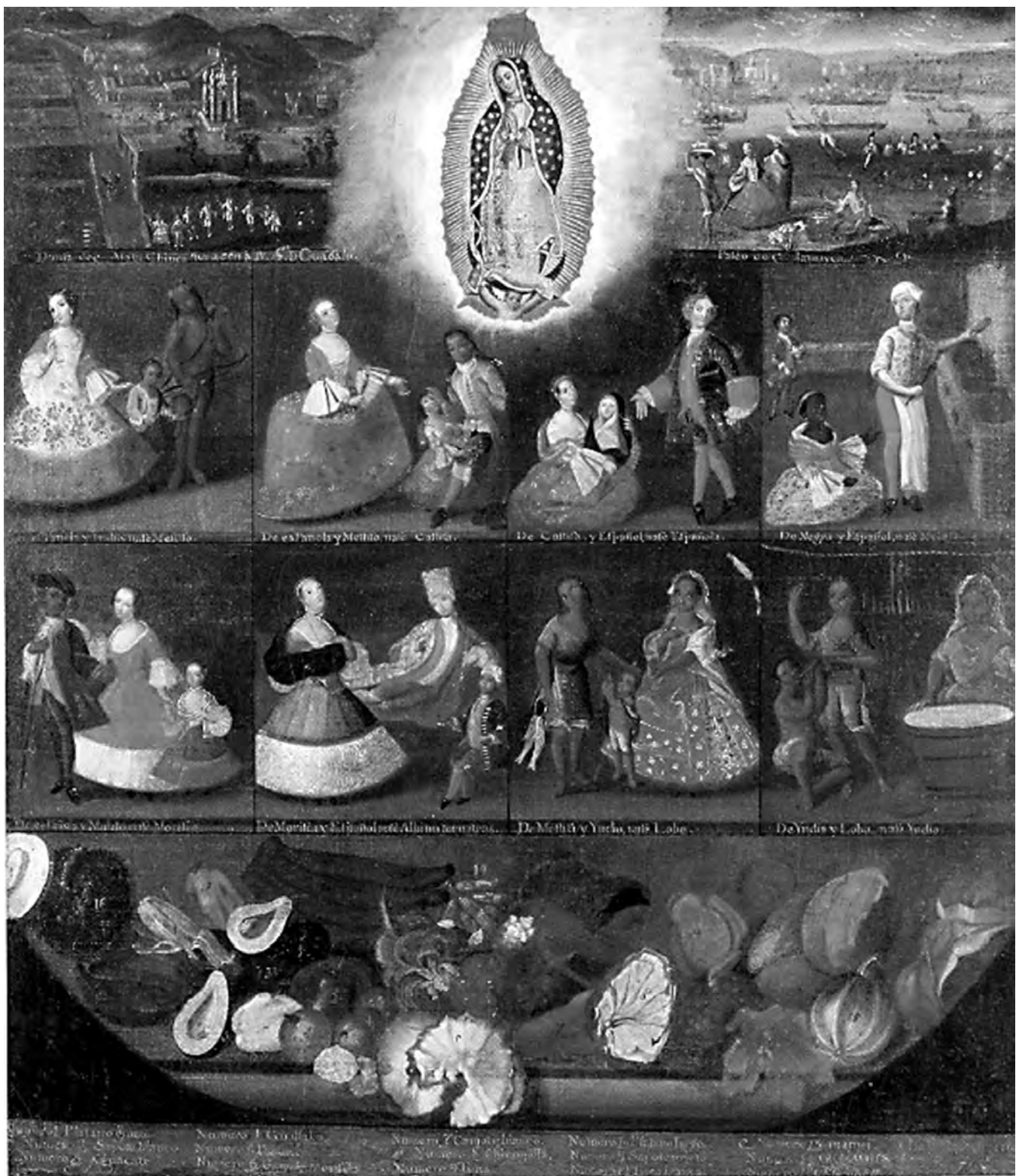


Figure 1. Luis de Mena, casta painting, c. 1750, oil on canvas, 120 x 104 cm. Museo de América, Madrid.



▲[upper left] Figure 2. Avocado (*Aguacate*), from Pedro Alonso O'Crowley's *Idea compendiosa del reino de la Nueva España* (1774). Biblioteca Nacional, Madrid.

▲[upper right] Figure 3. Miguel Cabrera, *From Spaniard and Indian, Mestiza*, 1763, oil on canvas, 132 x 101 cm. Private Collection.

◀Figure 4. Miguel Cabrera, *From Spaniard and Mulatto, Morisca*, 1763, oil on canvas, 132 x 101 cm. Private Collection.



Figure 5. Miguel Cabrera, *From Spaniard and Albino, Return-Backwards*, 1763, oil on canvas, 132 x 101 cm. Private Collection.