

Casta Painting

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers casta painting. By the end of this lesson, you'll be able to identify and define today's key terms, explain how casta paintings depicted the social stratification of the Spanish New World colonies, and identify examples of casta paintings. This will be accomplished through the exploration of:



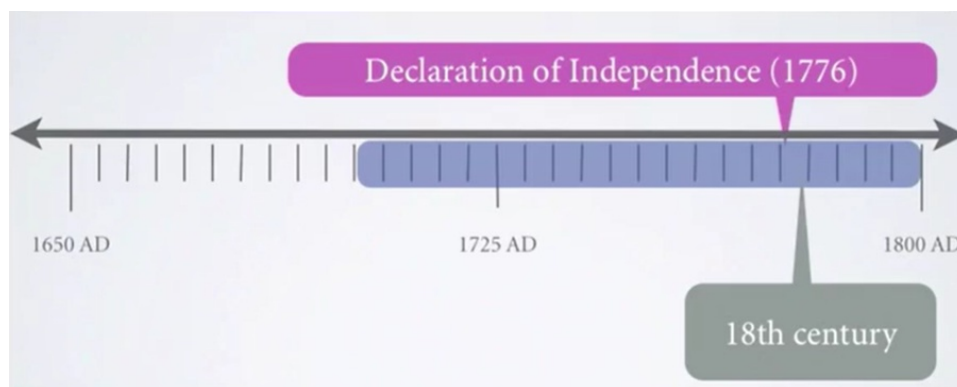
BIG IDEA

Casta paintings are reminders of the efforts to stratify the racial makeup of the Spanish colonies and create a social hierarchy.

Author Disclaimer: Today's key terms are being used strictly in a historical context, as these were terms that were used several hundred years ago. Today, they're considered to be racist and harmful to those at whom they are directed. Note that this lesson uses these terms in a historical context only and in no way condones their usage today.

1. Period and Location: Casta Paintings

The artwork that you will be looking at today dates from the 18th century, which is when casta paintings were being created in Spain's New World colonies. This lesson focuses geographically on Mexico.



2. Casta Painting: Historical Context

With the establishment of a New Spain far removed from the European continent, it was necessary to create a form of government to run the colonies while still answering to the Spanish kingdom. The **vicerealty** of New

Spain was established in 1535 and lasted until 1821. During this time, social stratification was employed by the Spanish as a way of maintaining order and limiting indigenous influence on the authority of the Spanish government and its control.

Stratification resulted in different castes, or castas, being established, that were dependent upon racial heritage. Casta paintings were a reflection of this stratification and illustrate how strong the influence was of perceived stereotypes of various racial combinations that existed throughout the colonies.

This caste system was based on racial hierarchy, and it became even more stratified with the 18th century Bourbon reforms under the Spanish kings Charles III and Charles IV. The reforms effectively limited the participation of non-Spanish people, or people of non-Spanish origin, in the government, as a way of strengthening the Spanish government's position in the New World.



TERM TO KNOW

Viceroyalty

The territory controlled by a person who rules in place of the king or queen.

3. Examples of Casta Painting

Within the Spanish system of social stratification, there were four primary racial groups. Each of these **casta paintings** that you will be examining shows a particular combination of mother and father, and the resulting offspring.



HINT

As you move through these examples, notice how the subject matter, which emphasizes race and class stereotypes, also depicts scenes of everyday life in much the same way that Dutch genre paintings do.

The Spanish variant of the genre painting is called **costumbrismo**.

Each title of the painting also refers to the parental combination and the resulting offspring, in perverse racial math, though it was perceived to be accurate for the time.



THINK ABOUT IT

Consider these two important things as you look at the paintings:

- First, consider the deeply racist nature of the paintings and the possible effects on the psyche of the viewer, particularly in the depiction of clothing and living conditions, as in the first example below.
- Second, note that these are a form of propaganda disguised as familial portraits. For example, in the image below, the title is painted on the image, which makes clear its overall purpose.

“De Mestizo y d’India, Coyote” essentially translates to: **Mestizo** (a person of European and indigenous descent) and Indian (a native to Mesoamerica), begets a “Coyote,” who is the offspring of that union.



De Mestizo y d'India, Coyote by Miguel Cabrera

1763

Oil on canvas

This next image is titled “Las Castas,” which translates to “The Castes,” and serves as a sort of chart of racial pairings, as well as their place in society.



Las Castas by Anonymous

18th century

Oil on canvas

The next painting is the only one shown today by a known artist. It translates to “From Spaniard (otherwise known as a **peninsular**, or someone originally born in Spain) and Morisca, (who is a descendant of the Moors who converted to Christianity, begets) Albino,” who is basically a white child born from a Spaniard and Morisca.



From Spaniard and Morisca, Albino by Juan Patricio Morleta Ruiz

18th century

Oil on canvas

This final image is called “De Negro y Española, Sale Mulatto,” which essentially means, “From Black and Spanish, Begets a **Mulatto**.” It is an interesting depiction from after the aforementioned Bourbon reforms.



De Negro y Española, Sale Mulatto by Anonymous

18th century

Oil on canvas

Note that although racist overtones exist, the family is dressed in European-style clothing, showing the influence of the Spanish government and the submission of the colonists to—at least in the eyes of the Spanish—the refinement of European culture. It's another example of art reflecting the social behaviors of the time, and an unfortunate but important reminder of the human history of perceived racial superiority.



TERMS TO KNOW

Casta Painting

A type of painting that was common in Mexico in the 18th century, and depicts a racially mixed family consisting of the two parents (of different races) and their child.

Costumbrismo

The depiction of scenes of everyday life, the Spanish equivalent of genre painting in Dutch art.

Mestiza/o

In the casta system, a person with one European and one indigenous parent.

Peninsulares

People originally born in Spain.

Mulatta/o

In the casta system, a person with one European and one African parent.

Criollo

A person of Spanish descent born and raised in the New World.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about **casta paintings**, which depict the social stratification of the Spanish New World colonies in an attempt to create a social hierarchy. In addition to learning how to identify and define today's key terms, you also learned about the **historical context of casta paintings**. You also learned how to identify **examples of casta paintings** by exploring various works of art from this period in New Spain.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Ian McConnell.



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