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The Colonial Efficacy of Casta Paintings

How can we understand artworks as classification systems? Is art a valid object of study in information science? If we answer “yes” to the latter question, how do we examine the first question? Casta paintings in colonial New Spain present a robust opportunity to understand art’s classificatory and documentary powers. In order to evaluate the efficacy of casta paintings as a classification system, it is necessary analyze how these works, as objects of colonial visual culture, enacted subjugation on multiple levels. Complex networks of power produce every classification system. Colonial power, particularly in urban New Spain, was often performed in seemingly paradoxical manners. Casta paintings responded to colonial anxieties about miscegenation, but they also acknowledged the realities of racial amalgamations in colonial New Spain. Put simply, New Spain was simultaneously a jewel for the Spanish Empire and the heart of an evil, non-Christian Other. This context reveals the critical necessity of social classification systems for European colonial expansion. To evaluate the knowledge organization casta paintings produced for colonial powers, I will focus on those held in the Denver Art Museum’s (DAM) New World Department. The DAM’s holdings include a complete set of sixteen casta paintings by Francisco Clapera, along with individual works by Jose de Alcibar and unidentified artists. Recognizable signifiers in these paintings enacted social classification at several levels in colonial New Spain.¹ For the methodology of this project, I follow Jonathan Furner’s approach to evaluating classification systems.² Furner’s prompt for classification researchers to evaluate how classification systems represent identity begets evaluation classification systems’ ideological and material structures. In the case of casta paintings, it makes sense to appraise their functions of identity representation on the one hand, and their descriptive power and retrieval functions on the other hand.

The methodology for this project falls at the intersections of documentation studies, classification studies, and postcolonial studies. Each of these perspectives is necessary to demonstrate how material exertions of power construct social classification systems. An art historical approach here is not enough. Art historians such as Ilona Katzew have done an exemplary job at excavating the visual culture terrain of casta paintings; this includes examinations of casta paintings’ commissions and uses, iconographic constructions, and material lives in colonial New Spain. By framing an analysis of casta paintings with a critical information science approach, this project contributes to the existing body of literature on casta paintings. An examination of casta paintings through lenses established by theorists

¹ I use the term “social classification” to indicate a classification of society and a classification system for society.

² Jonathan Furner, “Interrogating “Identity”: A Philosophical Approach to an Enduring Issue in Knowledge Organization,” *Knowledge Organization* 36, 1 (2009),

such as Jonathan Furner, George Lakoff, Safiya Noble, Melissa Adler, and Patrick Wilson is new and necessary. This framework reveals how casta paintings as a classification system became embedded in the spaces of daily life in colonial New Spain.

Casta paintings emerged in the eighteenth century New Spain (particularly Mexico) during the Bourbon Reforms, a set of legislative measures the Spanish crown carried out to subjugate the empire in the seventeenth century. These artistic works, often commissioned by Spanish viceroys as luxury items, were part of the larger *sistema de castas*, or racial “caste system” that played out in every facet of colonial life. One cannot understate the cognitive, physical, and social power of the *sistema de castas*. The socio- racial system was a production of embodied thought, in the way that George Lakoff defines it. The *sistema de castas* grew out of and classified the physical, tangible, and bodily experiences of peoples in colonial New Spain. As a classification system, the *sistema de castas* was imaginative and productive, not simply representative.³ As a hierarchical system of social categorization, it embodied a colonial worldview. The *sistema de castas* relied on metaphor and imagery for its power, and casta paintings were an essential mechanism of that.

The paintings were structured in series to denote the different racial mixtures that resulted from miscegenation between Spaniards, Indians, black Africans, and other peoples in New Spain.⁴ Significantly, the linear arrangement of these paintings (from Spanish, white, and pure to indigenous, black, and impure) denoted a sense of disintegrating social coherence as an entire set. Many casta paintings depicted all the racial mixture types (typically sixteen) as a series of images in one frame; however, some artists (particularly the Spanish Francisco Clapera) dedicated an entire canvas to each scene of racial mixture. This sense of disintegration is more visible in single panels that depicted an entire series of racial mixtures; it is less observable in a discontinuous set of panels, such as those at the DAM (see Figure 1). A visual analysis of these works reveals how they are more complicated than the taxonomies of racial archetypes we commonly think of in the vein of nineteenth and twentieth century ethnographical and anthropological portraits of racial “types.” Artists composed casta paintings to depict two racially different parents and a child, typically in domestic settings. As such, these paintings (and their artists) actually depict multifaceted social identities. This speaks to Furner’s examination of identity in classification systems. He claims that identity representation is a “conceptual minefield” in that “there are all sorts of dimensions on which different identities may be distinguished[.]”⁵ He explains identity as relational, co- constitutive of a subject and object, social, and personal. Casta paintings seek to firmly distinguish different races; however, they do so at intersections of gender, family, and class. They offer the racial object for the beholding subject, one that was intended to be

³ George Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind* (Chicago: The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2012), xiv, 7.

⁴ Susan Deans-Smith, “Casta Paintings,” *Not Even Past*, November 9, 2011, www.notevenpast.org/casta-paintings/

⁵ Jonathan Furner, “Interrogating “Identity”: A Philosophical Approach to an Enduring Issue in Knowledge Organization,” *Knowledge Organization* 36, 1 (2009), 4.

Figure 1. Ignacio María Barreda, *Las Castas Mexicanas*. 1777. 77 × 49 cm. Royal Academy of Fine Arts, Madrid. Available from: Wikimedia Commons, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ignacio_Mar%C3%ADa_Barreda_-_Las_castas_mexicanas.jpg. Accessed December 5, 2017.



Spanish viceroyalty or the crown. As traveling luxury items, casta paintings were intended to serve highly social roles. Nevertheless, they depicted intimate, private family scenes of affection or strife. In this way, casta paintings address the facets of identity Furner examines.

As Ilona Katzew notes in her monograph on casta paintings, by the eighteenth century, “race alone was no longer a reliable index to social rank.”⁶ In response to this fact, casta paintings effectively classified race in terms of social relationships. This fact actually highlights the social construction of race, rather than the biological model of race that colonial powers sought to authenticate.⁷ These paintings are highly effective at establishing identity as relational, in the sense that Furner outlines.⁸ The scenes are composed to highlight relationships between “classes of documents”—different races.

The paintings are legible and symbolically composed to allow observers to navigate the system via familial relationships. For example, In *De Español, y Castiza, Español, circa 1775*, Francisco Clapera composes a scene of domestic harmony (see Figure 2). The Spanish, white father is a man of leisure, and stands at the threshold between the interior of his home and the public outdoors. The mother, a castiza (a person with one mestizo—European and Indian parentage—parent and one Spanish parent) smiles and casts her eyes downward at her son. The child is shown in an act of obedience and service, as he hands his father his wide-brimmed cap. The relationship between father and son, and mother and son, both express domestic harmony. This is significant, especially considering the child’s racial identifier—Español, or Spanish. The child inherits directly the father’s pure Spanish race, without mixture from the mother’s castiza status. This casta painting example demonstrates how colonial people understood race on a linear scale. One could actually improve his or her racial standing through strategic social and racial unions, such as the example here. Casta paintings effectively represent this upwards trajectory through familial relationships. Casta paintings also express the obverse of this concept. In Clapera’s *De Mulato, y Española, Morisco*, a scene of domestic violence unfolds (see Figure 3). The Mulato father pushes aside the Spanish mother, as she grips on to his waistcoat. The Morisco son echoes the father’s motions, as he pulls on her skirt. The spilled milk, fallen cap, and bloody, half-cleaned bird on the floor all work to create a network of violent relationships in the scene. The message is clear—racial mixing, especially with individuals of black African descent, is dangerous. Moreover, this example posits blackness as the male aggressor, while whiteness is posited as the female victim.

⁶ Ilona Katzew, *Casta Painting: Images of Race in Eighteenth-Century Mexico* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005), 44.

⁷ For an overview of the literature on the biological understanding of race in colonial New Spain and the concept of *limpieza de sangre*, see: Kristin Gilles, “Race and Class in Colonial Mexico: An Overview of the Literature,” *Center for Africana Working Paper Series*, 2009, 1-20.

⁸ Furner, “Interrogating ‘Identity,’” 6. Furner outlines how classification systems always confront conditions that manifest identities at levels of individuation (x is the same as y) and instantiation (x is the same kind of thing as y); casta paintings construct instantiations of racial identities that cut across instantiations of gender and class. Both Furner and casta paintings suggest an understanding of identity as an ambivalent site of difference and familiarity.

Figure 2. Francisco Clapera, De Español, y Castiza, Español. Circa 1775. 51.2 x 58.9 cm. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO. From: Denver Art Museum, <https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2013.321.1>



Figure 3. Francisco Clapera, De Mulato, y Español, Morisco. Circa 1775. 51.1 x 39.7 cm. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO. From: Denver Art Museum, <https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2011.428.5>



These two examples highlight the way in which casta paintings become a meaningful classification system through the relationships they represent. This supports Katzew's argument that "the image of the family served to naturalize the social hierarchy portrayed in casta painting. Since the subordination of woman to man and child to woman were considered natural facts, other forms of social hierarchy could be depicted in familial terms to guarantee social difference as a category of nature."⁹ In other words, casta paintings naturalized colonial hierarchies. Safiya Noble has demonstrated how visual representations of racial stereotypes have been wielded to naturalize slavery and to manifest a narrative of subjugation throughout time.¹⁰ These narratives are powerful precisely because they cut across intersections of race and gender. Similarly, casta paintings manifested real and material narratives of colonial power at intersections of race and class. This can be understood through casta paintings' indications of luxury and wealth. It is visible in Jose de Alcibar's 1760 work *De Español y Negra, Mulato* (see Figure 4). The scene depicts a moment of genuine family intimacy, as the child lifts a silver brazier to light his father's cigarette and the mother makes hot chocolate in a copper pot. The household harmony corresponds to the whiter scene in *De Español, y Castiza, Español*. The level of wealth in these scenes, however, indicates the difference in racial identities represented. While the latter scene clearly depicts a leisure-class family, Alcibar's scene contains less luxurious signifiers. The father wears a chintz banyan, or dressing coat. Chintz, a printed fabric that made its way to the Americas via trade with India, was a ubiquitous symbol of an aspirational lower class.¹¹ The rebozo, or rectangular shawl, that the mother wears carried similar class implications. In this way, although the domestic harmony in this example is indicative of a white European identity, the level of class marks the blackness of the subjects identified. On the level of gender, one should note that this painting and Clapera's *De Mulato, y Española, Morisco* both depict white, Spanish and black African mixed parentage. Importantly, however, the parents in these two paintings present inverse gender and racial roles: Jose de Alcibar's subjects are a white male and black female. This speaks to the intersecting levels of social subjugation needed to naturalize a colonial hierarchy, a fact that again echoes Noble's work. Casta paintings were successful in their identification of race; however, this success contradicted the colonial European belief in a biological classification of race.

⁹ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 93.

¹⁰ Safiya Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 99. Noble traces a trajectory between racist advertising in print culture to racist results in Google's information retrieval system.

¹¹ Donna Pierce, *Companion to Spanish Colonial Art at the Denver Art Museum* (Denver, CO: Denver Art Museum, 2012), 57. Pierce states, "...chintz was used extensively by the lower and middle classes and reflects their consciousness of fashion at a time when upper classes wore Chinese silks with similar floral patterns."

Figure 4. Jose de Alcibar, *De Espanol y Negra, Mulato*. Circa 1760. Oil on canvas. 77.8 x 98.4 cm. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO. From: Denver Art Museum, <https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2014.217>



Instead, casta paintings maintained coherence and reinforced colonial hierarchies by representing social constructions of racial classifications. This point is significant, as it suggests casta paintings should be understood alongside other documentary classification systems that have been used to justify power over individuals across time. Information science theorists such as Melissa Adler have examined the social constructions of classification systems designed to control biological bodies. In *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge*, Adler demonstrates how classification systems at the Library of Congress (in the form of cataloging) correspond with societal attempts to pathologize non-normative sexualities throughout time.¹² Casta paintings, as a classification system, corresponded with societal attempts to subjugate impure racial

¹² Melissa Adler, *Cruising the Library: Perversities in the Organization of Knowledge* (New York, New York: Fordham University Press, 2017).

mixtures in colonial New Spain. In both cases, these classification systems control human bodies.

Though casta paintings exposed some of the inherent contradictions in colonial rule, their purpose was to justify that power. Casta paintings are at their most effective as a classification system when one directly addresses their intended use. Despite the complex scenes of domesticity, gender, and class, casta paintings are still at their core an enumerative system. The sistema de castas at large was uniquely concerned with a hierarchical organization of society, and casta paintings were a critical visual component of that. Casta paintings, in fact, were sent back to Spain for imperial review.¹³ These objects, then, were understood as an identity for New Spain, and one that would stand up to imperial scrutiny. In this way, the identity of the classification system is of even greater importance when evaluating the system's efficacy. Significantly, this identity is highly interoperable with other classification systems that colonial powers designed to represent New Spain.

The format of casta paintings and the level of detail contained therein corresponded with other representations of "curiosities" in the New World. An examination of digital presentations of Spanish colonial paintings in online spaces is particularly pertinent here. Interestingly, when one performs a search for "casta painting" in the DAM New World Department database, artistic depictions of flora and fauna are also retrieved. One can compare the composition of casta paintings with examples such as Buenaventura Jose Guiol's *Sample of American Birds*, circa 1770-1780 (see Figure 5). Species are distinguished on a visual level, and indicated with inscribed text. Images such as these were abundant in colonial New Spain, and they worked to classify entities in the New World in a way that was familiar to a European, Enlightenment-era audience.¹⁴ The ethics of this comparison are clear to a contemporary reader: casta paintings classify non-white human beings in the same manner as animals. The pointedness of this criticism, however, is anachronistic when applied to an imperial Spanish audience. In fact, the colonial project relied on the unquestionable, God-given authority of white Spaniards above all others.¹⁵ Other Bourbon Reform policies that policed ethnic boundaries further elucidate this point. Urban segregation, curfew laws, dress codes, and other social laws in the eighteenth century all operated together to make racial boundaries more visible.¹⁶ Casta paintings can and should be considered in conjunction with these regulatory systems; they operated together to create a seemingly impenetrable social hierarchy composed of highly visible ethno-racial boundaries. In this historical context, casta paintings' interoperability with other classification systems of New World entities underpinned their power and usefulness to the colonial regime.

¹³ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 69.

¹⁴ Julie Wilson Frick and Donna Pierce, "Sample of American Birds," last revised 2015, <https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2013.321.1>

¹⁵ Jake Frederick, "Without Impediment: Crossing Racial Boundaries in Colonial Mexico," *The Americas* 67, 4 (April 2011), 497.

¹⁶ Katzew, *Casta Painting*, 41.

Figure 5. Buenaventura Jose Guiol, Sample of American Birds. Circa 1770-1780. Oil on canvas. 60.6 x 53.7 cm. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO. From: Denver Art Museum, <https://denverartmuseum.org/object/2013.321.1>



The question, then, becomes: to what extent did this all actually work? Did colonial society in New Spain actually operate along these divisions, in daily life? In fact, the colonial desire to order and control space in New Spain was a largely inadequate project. Increasing miscegenation numbers in the seventeenth century greatly diversified the racial, ethnic, and

class make-up of places like Mexico, particularly in their urban areas. Miscegenation, the act of “passing,” and colorism within non-white communities confused the supposed segregation of the *sistema de castas* and their visual counterpart of casta paintings.¹⁷ Magali Carrera illustrates the possible futility of hierarchical racial classification systems with a fictitious (but historically informed) anecdote of a castizo woman gazing upon a casta painting showing her own racial niche. Carrera’s narrative powerfully illustrates how she would not necessarily recognize herself in the painting, in terms of physical likeness or social accouterments.¹⁸ The accuracy of casta paintings’ retrieval functions remains hazy. Colonial individuals would find it difficult to look at a casta painting, then go out and identify the racial types the painting represents. This example, considered in conjunction with the realities of daily life in colonial Mexico, leads one to consider if a taxonomic classification of race is possible, let alone advisable.

Patrick Wilson’s analysis of bibliographic control illustrates one of the largest conceptual fractures in the classification system of casta paintings. Wilson frames two forms of bibliographic control: that which is descriptive and that which is exploitative. Wilson uses information retrieval systems to define these forms of control: an information retrieval system wielding descriptive control is able to line up any population of writings in an arbitrary manner. This is a necessary precondition for exploitative control, wherein an information retrieval system is able to make the best use of those bodies of writings.¹⁹ Casta paintings allowed their patrons—families of Spanish colonial powers—to both retrieve information about the racial mixtures in colonial New Spain and to wield this information for the use of colonial justification and expansion. Although casta paintings worked with other colonial classification systems to wield great descriptive and exploitative control for colonizers, these artworks allowed for little bibliographic control by the colonized. Casta paintings are clearly effective in considering the domain of colonial rulers; however, this efficacy immediately breaks down in considering the domain of people the casta paintings depict. Casta paintings allowed colonizers to collate a seemingly comprehensive set of “documents”—racial types—in a fashion that fit the needs of the colonial enterprise. Moreover, casta paintings allowed colonial powers to define people as documents through documents.²⁰ These needs, however, were ones of total domination of nonwhite, indigenous people. As such, casta paintings could not allow nonwhite, indigenous people any real exploitative control over them.²¹ This is a particularly poignant consideration, since

¹⁷ R. Douglas Cope. *The Limits of Racial Domination: Plebian Society in Colonial Mexico* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1994), 4-5.

¹⁸ Magali Carrera, “Locating Race in Late Colonial Mexico,” *Art Journal* 57, 3 (Autumn 1998), 37.

¹⁹ Patrick Wilson, *Two Kinds of Power: An Essay on Bibliographic Control* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 20-40.

²⁰ Ron Day explained this process as documentality, wherein social identities are formed around indexical relations. For more detail see Ronald E. Day, *Indexing It All: The Subject in the Age of Documentation, Information, and Data* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014).

²¹ Wilson, *Two Kinds of Power*, 20-40.

nonwhite, indigenous people are depicted so thoroughly in this system. This, in conjunction with the realities of daily life in colonial Mexico, exposes the limits of casta paintings as a “good” classification system.

An evaluation of casta paintings’ classificatory powers takes an interesting turn when considering what art historians have identified as casta paintings’ most valuable contribution to understanding colonial visual culture. Ilona Katzew, Donna Pierce, Mageli Carrera, and others have all explained how casta paintings acted as documents of social mobility for an emergent creole elite in colonial New Spain. Creole people— individuals of Spanish heritage born in New Spain—developed a visual language of self- identification through the genre of casta paintings. By acknowledging racial mixing while simultaneously categorizing white Spaniards as “good” and black, non-Spaniards as “bad,” casta paintings allowed the creole elite to proudly identify as a unique but morally appropriate product of the colonial project. If one considers the possibility that the ultimate goal of knowledge organization is to produce identities, it is impossible to deny that casta paintings are a “good” knowledge organization system. The messy business of creating a visual, enumerative classification system of racially and ethnically diverse people in colonial Mexico, however, allows for a more ambivalent evaluation of casta paintings’ knowledge organization.

Evaluating casta paintings’ efficacy as a classification system has serious methodological ramifications. By investigating the documentary abilities of casta paintings to produce identities, we can approach these artistic objects in the realm of information science theory. We can enrich studies in information science by excavating visual and artistic classification and documentation systems. Art historians and visual culture theorists such as Ilona Katzew make visible the complex material lives of artworks. Casta paintings were a vital link in the chain of colonial power in New Spain. These artworks cut across intersections of race, gender, and class to enumerate a classification system that was both nuanced and rigid. Understanding how casta paintings did this forces us to recognize the complex weft and warp of social life in colonial New Spain.

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