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Charlene Villaseñor Black: Creating the Cult of St. Joseph

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INTRODUCTION

IN 1555 St. Joseph—humble carpenter, earthly spouse of the Virgin Mary, and foster father of Jesus—was made patron of the Conquest and conversion in Mexico, a position he held until 1746, when the Virgin of Guadalupe was elevated as his co-patroness. In 1679 King Charles II of Spain named St. Joseph patron of his kingdom, toppling Santiago, or St. James, traditional protector of the Spanish realms for over eight hundred years, from his honored position. In Spain, St. Joseph became a national icon and emblem of masculine authority in a society plagued by crisis and social disorder. In the Americas, the saint—as model father, caring spouse, and hard-working provider—became the perfect paradigm of Spanish colonial power. The visual arts played key roles in the creation of these discourses, as this study demonstrates through examination of numerous images, period print sources, and documents in Spanish, Latin, Náhuatl, and Otomí. A study of the imagery of the most important saint of the period, *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire* investigates the manipulation of the rich coded language of Catholicism to construct gender discourses in Spanish and Mexican art of the sixteenth through the eighteenth century.

After languishing in obscurity for centuries, the cult of St. Joseph became the central saint's cult of the early modern period, and Josephine devotion spread throughout Spain and its colonies. Spanish and Mexican churches prominently displayed depictions of Joseph, sacred plays praised him, and engravings popularized his image. As the most commonly rep-

resented saint in early modern Spain and colonial Mexico, Joseph appears in the oeuvres of countless artists, including the Spanish painters El Greco (1541–1614), Bartolomé Esteban Murillo (1617–82), and Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), and the Mexican artists Baltasar de Echave Ibia (1583–1650), Juan Correa (1646–1716), and Miguel Cabrera (1695–1768). Seventeenth-century Spanish and Mexican artists reconceptualized Joseph as an important figure, and they gave him an increasingly substantial role in their images, placing greater compositional importance on his figure and representing him as the youthful, physically robust, diligent head of the Holy Family.

Despite the wealth of Hispanic depictions of St. Joseph, despite their unusual qualities, and despite the importance attached to his cult, no comprehensive study has previously focused on the topic. Although regularly singled out for their importance by art historians, Spanish and Mexican Baroque images of St. Joseph have not received the scholarly attention that, by virtue of both their scope and their interpretive richness, they so obviously demand.¹ A partial explanation for the neglect of Hispanic Josephine images may be found through critical examination of the historiographies of Spanish Golden Age and Mexican colonial art. Hispanists have long been engaged in recovering archival documents, producing monographic studies, and documenting artistic patronage. To date, very few thematic studies of Spanish or Mexican art have been produced. Furthermore, despite the fact that most Spanish and colonial Latin American art is religious in nature, religious subjects have, in general, been neglected. Whereas Spanish court art, mythology, still life, and collecting practices have been explored in depth, less scholarly attention has been directed to the thousands of Madonnas, Crucifixions, saints, and martyrs represented in Spain and the Americas.²

As a newer field, colonial Latin American art history has inspired more innovative scholarship. Recent studies have focused on the survival and transformation of native visual practices in the wake of the Conquest and on the related issues of indigenous agency, cultural hybridity, and the multidialectical nature of colonial visual languages. Much stimulating research has centered on the sixteenth-century contact period, but by emphasizing artworks in which the native hand can be discerned, scholars have left much seventeenth- and eighteenth-century colonial art ripe for investigation. Furthermore, with the exception of the Virgin of Guadalupe, few religious personages have undergone systematic analysis.³ In light of James Lockhart's recent demonstration of the centrality of Catholic saints in post-Conquest Mexican society, and given the fact that they attained far greater importance in Mexican Catholicism than did the figure of Christ, it is clear that additional study of saints' cults in the Americas is urgently needed.⁴

Several traits inherent in Hispanic Catholic imagery may have disguised the richness and complexity of Joseph and Holy Family depictions. For example, once their forms were determined, the images changed little in the course of the period. Many representations seem homely or awkward to modern eyes, while others appear sweet and sentimental. This book argues that the repetitive nature of much Hispanic religious imagery results from the censorious power of the Spanish Inquisition, which discouraged experimentation in religious art, and from the use of the images as didactic tools to teach Catholic worshippers.⁵

This study proposes to connect study of Spanish and Latin American religious imagery of the sixteenth through the eighteenth century instead of studying these visual cultures in isolation. Inspired by postcolonial theorists, who have correctly insisted that colonialism occurred not just in the colonies but also in the mother country, this approach challenges the traditional division between Europe and the “New World.”⁶ Such a comparative approach makes particular sense in the case of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century religious art produced in Spain and Mexico. Artists on both sides of the Atlantic frequently depicted the same subjects. Artistic production in both locales was governed by identical Inquisition guidelines and functioned in conjunction with similar kinds of religious texts.

Comparative analysis of images of St. Joseph and the Holy Family has revealed striking similarities between art produced in the metropole and that made in the colonies—dramatic testimony to the censorship power of the Spanish Inquisition. The differences uncovered, however, are also striking and raise issues of colonialism, indigenous influence, and hybridity in colonial art. Furthermore, this study opens up the possibility, suggested by postcolonial theory, that colonial art may at times have informed Spanish visual culture. Certain developments in the cult of St. Joseph seem to have occurred first in the Americas, and then traveled back to the Old World. Admittedly, though, not all kinds of imagery necessarily benefit from this comparative approach; for example, knowledge of pre-Columbian cultures may be more illuminating than knowledge of Spanish art in studies of some Mexican colonial visual practices.⁷

This study also argues for renewed attention to the image through close description and semiotic analysis. Such careful visual readings of Spanish and Mexican images of St. Joseph and the Holy Family led me to question the usefulness of the rigid stylistic framework typically employed for such painting. The neat categories of Baroque Realism, Baroque Classicism, and Dynamic Baroque, originally defined for Italian art, do not adequately characterize Spanish or Mexican colonial art.⁸ Many “Realist” paintings contain elements of idealization; “Classical” works are marked by the inclusion of naturalistic detail; and the

“Dynamic” style, though exhibiting fluid brushwork, is often characterized by notable reserve and the obvious use of live models for figure types. The problem is confounded by the existence of numerous regional schools of painting and by the persistence of Baroque Realism in Spain.⁹ The inherent problems of transferring stylistic labels proposed for European art are exacerbated when applied to New World visual systems. Traditionally, scholars have been stymied by the mixed, or so-called *mestizo*, nature of colonial Mexican art, as well as by what have been described as tenaciously lingering medieval and Mannerist traits. Rejecting racialized characterizations such as “mestizo,” I attempt to view the new, hybrid nature of Mexican colonial cultural production on its own terms, not as a degraded provincial reflection of art in the mother country.

I began research for this study by compiling and examining as many Spanish and Mexican Baroque images of St. Joseph and the Holy Family as possible. After I viewed numerous art works, the images’ unusual characteristics emerged. From around 1600, Spanish and Mexican artists began depicting St. Joseph and the Holy Family more frequently than before and they significantly altered the composition of Holy Family imagery as well as St. Joseph’s demeanor from that of an unimportant, at times comical older man to a young, handsome, virile husband and father. The rise of a new saint’s cult to prominence necessitated the invention of new images. How did Spanish and Mexican artists create these new pictorial types? By comparing Josephine paintings to analogous representations of other saints—an approach, inspired by semiotics, that frames the images within the larger context of Hispanic visual culture—I discovered that in almost all cases, artists constructed the imagery of St. Joseph by using previously existing archetypes. In particular, artists followed pictorial models formerly employed in depictions of the Madonna and female saints.

This repurposing of prototypes used for depictions of female holy persons inspired my consideration of gender as an important category of analysis.¹⁰ As Mikhail Bakhtin has suggested, linguistic signs are intertextual; that is, they possess what Norman Bryson has described as a “ready-made quality.”¹¹ Artists, like writers, choose pictorial devices or words based on knowledge of the sign’s established meaning. I explored how Josephine imagery was used to encode gender ideologies and, specifically, how important the cult of St. Joseph was in articulating new ideals of virtuous masculinity, which valorized caring husbands and doting fathers.

Because they function as exemplars of behavior for Catholic beholders, saints’ images are a rich resource for revealing gender ideals.¹² According to period textual and visual sources, as the model husband and father St. Joseph even helped with domestic chores and childcare, tasks then being recommended to Hispanic men. One of a small hand-

ful of masculinity studies of the early modern period, this study attempts to correct the simplified view of Hispanic societies as hotbeds of *machismo*, by suggesting that multiple discourses of ideal masculinity existed. It also examines the particularly complex nature of gender discourse in Spain, notorious for the traditional rigidity of its gender-role prescriptions. In the Americas, with input from indigenous cultures, gender concepts became even more heterogeneous.¹³

My examination of the wider context of religious imagery led to the realization that, as the number of images of Joseph as tender, nurturing father increased, depictions of the Madonna in her maternal mode decreased, replaced by images of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception. Indeed, seventeenth-century Spanish and Mexican devotees claimed that St. Joseph was more important than his holy wife. The downgrading of Mary's position seems especially surprising in the context both of "Marian" Spain, where for centuries the Madonna had enjoyed a position of honor within the saintly pantheon, and of Mexico, a country that still today professes fervent devotion to the Virgin of Guadalupe. In the end, I demonstrate that as St. Joseph's cult rose to ascendancy in the seventeenth century, Mary declined in importance.

Because works of art never exist as autonomous signs, but always function within a larger cultural system, this study incorporates numerous sixteenth-, seventeenth-, and eighteenth-century printed texts, manuscripts, documents, and records of popular devotional practices. To frame religious images simply as aesthetic objects, wrested from their public, ritual functions, would be anachronistic and ahistorical.¹⁴ Thus, this study combines a commitment to excavating the past with concerns from critical theory and an interest in framing images politically.

Printed and manuscript sources of the period (in Spanish, Latin, Náhuatl, and Otomí) on the topic of St. Joseph and the Holy Family exist in abundance and have been a valuable resource. Care was taken to read a wide variety of texts, including those by the most famous hagiographers and theologians of the period—Alonso de Villegas, Pedro de Ribadeneira, Jerónimo Gracián de la Madre de Dios, and Antonio Pastrana—as well as other, lesser-known authors. Because this study examines imagery produced both in Spain and the Americas, it was important to establish the circulation of specific texts or ideas on both sides of the Atlantic. Art treatises, devotional works, sacred plays, religious poetry, and sermons reveal how the hagiography of Joseph was constructed and spread in early modern Spain and colonial Mexico, disclosing the significance of his life for period beholders. Art treatises, for example, provide valuable information on the existence of images of St. Joseph and Inquisition guidelines regulating their depiction. For the construction of the life of

Joseph, I have looked to hagiographies of the saint, devotional literature, poetry (including epic poetry and *romances*), sermons, Gospel commentaries, song texts (including *villancicos* and an oratorio), theatrical works (*comedia bíblica*), and prayers. Texts dedicated to other subjects—including the Virgin Mary, the Flight into Egypt, the Betrothal, the Nativity, the Circumcision, the Epiphany, and other saints—reveal additional information. Joseph is also invoked in treatises on carpentry, architecture, and matrimony. The *Brief Compendium of Carpentry* by Diego López de Arenas of 1633 opens with a print of the Flight into Egypt featuring St. Joseph in his role as family protector. Sermons and devotional texts promote the power of the saint's intercession and reveal the devotions performed before his image. Accounts of miracles wrought by depictions of Joseph testify to the power of religious imagery throughout the Spanish Empire.

My methodology questions traditional iconographic approaches to religious art, which rely on erudite writings such as the Greek or Latin patristics as their main sources.¹⁵ In the case of St. Joseph and the Holy Family, neither the Bible nor the Church Fathers conveyed much information. No medieval hagiographies exist, and apocryphal tales, such as Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, were firmly rejected as historically unreliable in the wake of the Council of Trent (1545–63).¹⁶ The study of Hispanic Josephine imagery is further complicated by the fact that the images and the texts were produced during the same period, and thus it is difficult to establish the texts as the source for the works of art. Both images and texts co-existed in the same cultural system, dependent on each other to produce and reinforce meaning.

Church and government promoters intended St. Joseph to be a universal saint, protector of all in the Spanish Empire, and evidence indicates his widespread appeal. Documents from several archives in Spain and Mexico—including royal decrees, papal briefs, chronicles, various manuscripts, and the records of guilds, confraternities, convents, and churches, plus city and ecclesiastical councils—describe the celebration of Joseph's cult and the role of the visual arts in it. Investigation into patronage revealed that a variety of organizations and individuals commissioned images of St. Joseph and the Holy Family in Spain and Mexico. The promotion of St. Joseph's cult thus cannot be ascribed solely to a particular religious order, the Spanish monarchy, or a particular patron, although social welfare organizations such as hospitals, charitable confraternities, and orphanages, as well as artisanal guilds, seem to have been particularly interested in Josephine imagery.

Throughout, this study attempts to recapture the original importance and authority of images of St. Joseph and the Holy Family produced in Golden Age Spain and colonial Mexico. The variety of these images and the varied discourses in which they participated

testify to the power of religious imagery in the period and, more specifically, to the potency of the depictions of St. Joseph and the Holy Family in the Spanish Empire. This book introduces the images, documents their popular and theological underpinnings, and frames them within wider social discourses. In the process, it attempts to recapture some of their original power.