Visual Arts

Painted in Mexico, Metropolitan Museum, New York – panoramic and profound

An exhibition that explores how artists in the 18th century interpreted a complex, conflicted land

Miguel Cabrera, 'The Divine Spouse' (1750)

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Before television news or Facebook, only art could provide a visual record of a society's aspirations and contradictions. In 18th-century New Spain, interpreting a complex, conflicted land in pictures was an especially crucial job. *Painted in Mexico 1700-1790*, the Metropolitan Museum's festive and revelatory window on to that period, makes it clear that artists looked to Europe for influence and also extolled the colony's glories, promoted Rome's religious power and also questionable local cults, served the nobility and portrayed village weddings. They confronted the paradoxes of race, noting both the oppressive distinctions between castes and the ways they mixed. Painters aspired to such a central role that they claimed God as the profession's first member.

The show narrates 90 years in 110 works, many unpublished, unknown and anonymous. But two figures stand out: José de Ibarra in the first half of the century and Miguel Cabrera in the next generation. Ibarra was of mixed race but passed as Spanish at a time when painters tried to keep their brotherhood racially pure and certifiably European. He mastered a distinctively Mexican genre known as the *casta*, an anthology of racial types. An ostentatiously pale Spaniard in a sombre cloak and broad-brimmed hat holds himself in proud profile. His mulatto wife and their *morisca* daughter — the terms denote different gradations of African bloodlines — sport more colourful and coded costume, including jewellery, lipstick, lace. They wrap themselves in sumptuous mantles called *mangas*, which contrast both with European clothing, which was forbidden to non-whites, and the Indian outfits that these members of a rich man's family wouldn't touch.

Cabrera's gory version of Jesus's sacred heart could serve as a poster for the next Godfather sequel

Ibarra's anthropological studies continue. "Mexican Indians" shows a three-person family in embroidered tunics, hauling their harvest to market and brimming with Christian virtue. The man bends under an immense basket of fruit, an emblem of honest labour and plenty; the woman turns her back to the viewer in an attitude at once vigorous and modest. (It's a good bet that Diego Rivera had Ibarra's work in mind when he ennobled toiling peasants in his Mexico City murals.) The pendant to that picture is "Barbarian Indians", in which unreconstructed (that is, non-Christian) natives hunt with bow and arrow.

Cabrera may have studied with Ibarra, and to his teacher's European technique, American sensibility and astute eye, he added a sense of religious drama that made him Mexico's pre-eminent artistic celebrity in the mid-18th century. His gory version of Jesus's sacred heart — slashed, severed, bleeding, stuck with a cross, wrapped in thorns and encircled by cherubs — could serve as a poster for a shlock-horror movie. Cabrera's portrait of the colonial grande dame Doña María Bárbara Guadalupe de Ovando y Rivadeneyra is two paintings in one: below, a pious, rigid woman trussed in a gown and encrusted in punctiliously rendered lace; above, her guardian angel, a hazy winged action figure in a swirl of robes. In both these works, spiritual metaphor collides with literal observation, and the results verge on the psychedelic.

Migeuel Cabrera, 'The Sacred Heart of Jesus' (c.1756)

Cabrera excelled at internal tension. His “Divine Spouse”, intended to focus the minds and ease the days of cloistered nuns, shows a doe-eyed, rosy-lipped Jesus lolling in a bed of flowers and letting a tiny lamb nibble on his bare feet. An inscription gets right to the point: “You souls who gaze on such rare beauty, see how mad it would be not to decide to love it.” The picture’s sensuality and vividness invite close, even lascivious examination, but as the pure in spirit move towards the surface, they notice the bower bedecked with words of virtue, including, just beneath His shapely right flank, “Mortificación”.

Cabrera reached such lofty status that in 1756 he published an analysis of the revered “Virgen de Guadalupe”, a Madonna painted on fabric that had appeared, fully realised, before an Aztec named Juan Diego in 1531. In *Maravilla Americana*, Cabrera approached the emblem of Mexico with scientific and connoisseurial rigour, and ringingly confirmed it as the product of a non-human hand. By certifying that no mortal could have fashioned such a marvel, he challenged the Pope to acknowledge its divine authorship (that took another 150 years), bolstered the major religious symbol of New Spain, and encouraged Indians who fused the Virgin with their own deities. Cabrera also effectively made God the painter’s colleague. An unknown artist literalised that last conceit in

a scene showing the Lord Himself, wielding palette and brush, dabbing in the colours on the Virgin of Guadalupe.

José de Ibarra, 'From Spaniard and Mulatta, Morisca' (c.1730)

That holy image's mystical powers could be transferred from object to object. A copy by Nicolás Enriquez includes four scenes of the miraculous apparition, plus an inscription declaring that it

was sanctified by contact with the original. In a large oil by José de Páez (1770-80), the familiar cloth hangs like a banner above Christ carrying the cross; below, a multiracial crowd of sinners sinks into a bog, pleading to be pulled to spiritual safety. Páez's work acted as an advertisement for the sale of indulgences on the Virgin's behalf: drop a couple of coins in the box, and she would shorten your sentence in purgatory. It also affirmed that the afterlife cancelled all those caste distinctions that the living laboured so hard to preserve.

Painting in 18th-century New Spain behaved much the way Rivera's murals did in 20th-century Mexico, as document, analysis and propaganda. Rivera depicted the modern nation as the product of its tormented economic, racial, and religious past. The Met's exhibition suggests that he owed a debt to his forerunners, who rendered that history in ways just as panoramic and profound.

To July 22, metmuseum.org

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