

Hybridity of Costume and the Development of Race: Conflicting Meanings within the *Portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and Sons Pedro and Domingo*

On view at the Museo Nacional del Prado in Madrid is a painting that was hidden away for hundreds of years in Spain's royal archives and museum collections, still bearing the orange and white inventory numbers. Though it may at first glance seem unassuming and unremarkable, this painting is one of the most illuminating examples of the complexity and development of the concept of race in Spanish Colonial America. The painting is a three-quarter-length portrait of three "mulatto" men, standing proudly against a near-featureless gray background. All three hold iron-tipped spears and wear the signs of their wealth in golden jewelry and lavish silks and brocades imported from Asia and Europe. Their costume mixes Spanish-style ruffs, doublets, and hats (held in their hands to show respect to the king) with the indigenous Andean shell necklaces and gold facial adornments, which stand out against their dark skin. Above the head of each man is his name (accompanied by the honorific "Don") and his age. To the far right, painted in an elaborate gilded frame, is the Latin text: "the doctor Juan del Barrio y Sepúlveda, Judge of the royal audience of Quito, had this (portrait) made at his own expense in the Year 1599, for his majesty Philip (III) Catholic king of Spain and the Indies."¹ This is the *Portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and Sons Pedro and Domingo*, painted in 1599 by the native Andean artist Andrés Sánchez Gallque and commissioned by Barrio y Sepúlveda as a record to the Spanish throne of successful "pacification" of the native and "mulatto" population. The hybridity of the clothing

¹ Tom Cummins, "Three Gentlemen from Esmeraldas," in *Slave Portraiture in the Atlantic World*, ed. Agnes Lugo-Ortiz and Angela Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 121.

and personal adornments of the three men from Esmeraldas provides a fascinating view into the negotiation of these “new” and complex racial dynamics of early Spanish colonial America.

Before we begin, it is important to address the difficulties and problematic histories regarding the terminology surrounding this work; many of the terms that have historically been used to describe mixed-race, Indigenous American, African, and enslaved people have been used to dehumanize and otherize people for their dark skin and/or imposed social and economic status. This painting has been previously displayed with the title *Los mulatos de Esmeraldas*; *mulato* or “mulatto” as a racial category is an invention of the Spanish colonial project to differentiate and dehumanize the mixed-race descendants of Indigenous Americans (in this case, the other parent is African, but later the category solely refers to the children of indigenous and white parents). The term has deeply racist roots, originating in the idea that these children were “half-breeds” like mules (the etymological root). Throughout this paper, there will be discussions of the “hybridity” of costume, but it must be stressed that this is in reference to the intermingling of cultural elements and is in no way an endorsement of the pseudoscientific ideas of racial categories. While the conception of race has a very real impact on society, these terms support the incorrect notion that race is a biological reality as well. This essay will attempt to avoid using historically dehumanizing words except in quotations and when they are necessary for clarity.

Before the arrival of the Spanish, the region of Esmeraldas – the northwestern coast of modern-day Ecuador – was at the furthest edge of the Inca Empire. As the Spanish conquered their way across the continent, establishing a colonial foothold at the city of Quito, they brought with them European diseases to which the indigenous people had no prior contact or immunity. The fraction of the population that survived the devastation these diseases caused either retreated inland to larger cities or collected into small, isolated chiefdoms along the coast and in the dense

rainforests.² The Spanish also brought with them enslaved Africans, some of whom managed to escape and join with these chiefdoms. Unlike the Spanish whose military forces struggled to make any headway outside the major cities, these “maroon” communities successfully formed through violent expansion and intermarriage with indigenous women. The Spanish wanted to “pacify” the indigenous communities so that they could exploit their labor – without enslaving them. For decades, the Spanish attempted to use these “maroon” communities as proxy-settlers, granting them tentative legitimization while they “subdued” the region before ultimately handing control over to the colonial government.³ The 1599 trip of Don Francisco and his sons to Quito took place during a period of shifting Spanish strategy in which there was an attempt at formal peace between the colonial government and these “maroon” communities. In exchange for legitimization from the Spanish throne, lavish gifts, and freedom from labor obligations, Don Francisco agreed to stop the raids that threatened Spanish *encomenderos* and their control of native labor in the region.⁴ With this peace agreement, the royal audiencia in Quito was able to make the claim that they “pacified” the region and successfully secured it for the Spanish king. The commission of this painting also documented the development of a new category of person in the eyes of the Spanish; this intermingling of escaped Africans and Indigenous Americans formed the “mulatto.” The negotiation of this new identity and the “pacification” of the region is evident in the depiction of the three men from Esmeraldas, who have adopted elements “of native ritual, language, dress, and adornment,”⁵ but still show deference to colonial authority through the integrated Spanish elements of their attire.

² Charles Beatty-Medina, “Caught between Rivals: The Spanish-African Maroon Competition for Captive Indian Labor in the Region of Esmeraldas during the Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Centuries,” *The Americas* 63, no. 1 (2006): 116.

³ Beatty-Medina, “Caught,” 118.

⁴ Beatty-Medina, “Caught,” 125.

⁵ Beatty-Medina, “Caught,” 122.

The depiction of this “new kind” of person was further complicated by the identity of the artist and, more specifically, his indigeneity. There is very little evidence left regarding the artist, Andrés Sánchez Gallque; however, based on the few records and documents of commission that remain, it is clear he was a highly regarded painter at the time. His contracts indicate that his work was highly valued, with commissions coming from a range of high-status patrons.⁶ Additionally, his title of “master painter” reflected his wealth and prestige, along with the location of his family residence among the “other elite indigenous families.”⁷ Of the five paintings that are confirmed creations of Gallque, the *Portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and Sons Pedro and Domingo* was one of two paintings that bear his signature, which as Susan Webster argues, indicates that its presence in this case was “not an inclusion demanded by the nature of the commission to highlight indigenous alterity and ‘pacification.’”⁸ Instead, the signature can be read as a conscious assertion by the artist of his identity and authorship. It is possible that, in the eyes of the Spanish colonial government, the choice of an indigenous artist for this painting was another method of demonstrating the successful “pacification” of the indigenous population to the Spanish throne. It is important to note that, at the time, Spanish-controlled Quito had a relatively large cadre of both Andean and European painters, so it is significant that Gallque, an indigenous artist, was specifically chosen to create this painting.⁹ Gallque’s status was also distinguished from the general indigenous population through his identity as an *indio ladino*, an “acculturated class” of native people who spoke both Spanish and their native language and commonly wore elements of European clothing.¹⁰ Interestingly, the

⁶ Susan V. Webster, “Of Signatures and Status: Andrés Sánchez Gallque and Contemporary Painters in Early Colonial Quito,” *The Americas* 70, no. 4 (2014): 624.

⁷ Webster, “Of Signatures,” 624.

⁸ Webster, “Of Signatures,” 613.

⁹ Webster, “Of Signatures,” 624.

¹⁰ Webster, “Of Signatures,” 618.

term “ladino” was not born in the “New World,” but had instead been developed as a marker within Spain to refer to enslaved and freed sub-Saharan Africans and distinguish between the different levels of assimilation as indicated by their knowledge of Castilian (with *ladino* or half *ladino* describing fluency or a small level of comprehension).¹¹ While this status reflected Gallque’s willingness to submit to Spanish control, he also “manipulated European cultural forms and technologies to his own benefit,” gaining status and renown within this system for his (and his family’s) benefit.¹² In some ways, this is exactly what the men from Esmeraldas were accomplishing through their adoption of Spanish cultural forms of clothing and textiles while still asserting their autonomy in indigenous adornments.

Long before the complexities of this “new” racial category were an issue, Europeans had deeply negative associations and stereotypes of blackness and dark skin. As Joaneath Spicer points out, both of the proposed origins of dark skin that were widely believed by Europeans were also deeply dehumanizing. The earlier explanation dates back to Ancient Greece, who attributed dark skin to climate, calling the lands (and people) “Ethiopia” (or “Ethiops”) meaning “burnt” or “scorched by the sun.”¹³ The more common Renaissance explanation came from the biblical story of Ham from Genesis, where the color of Africans’ skin came from “the curse placed on a previously white family as a mark of inherent sin and the hypersexuality that had long been assumed to be an African trait.”¹⁴ Regardless of the explanation, dark skin was an obvious visual marker of difference and was used by Renaissance Europeans to justify

¹¹ Aurelia Martín Casares, “Free and Freed Black Africans in Granada in the Time of the Spanish Renaissance,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Thomas Earle and Kate Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 251.

¹² Webster, “Of Signatures,” 619.

¹³ Joaneath Spicer, “European Perceptions of Blackness as Reflected in the Visual Arts,” in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012), 36.

¹⁴ Spicer, “European,” 37.

discrimination. This negative association was compounded by the long European history of associating light with good and black with evil, helping to feed into the European impression that sub-Saharan Africans were “savage,” hypersexual idol worshippers. The Renaissance also marked a major shift in demographics in Europe; while slavery had long been a common practice, the historic source of (white) enslaved people from the Black Sea region was blocked by the Ottomans and, as a result, sub-Saharan Africans became a larger (or even the main) source of enslaved people.¹⁵ This noticeable influx of enslaved Africans added to the extant prejudices against dark skin to create a default association in the European consciousness between blackness and the “standardised [sic] inferiority imposed by the condition of slavery.”¹⁶ This association was especially pervasive in Spain, where both free and freed black people faced systemic discrimination due to their skin color. Guild legislation expressly forbade enslaved and freed people from learning any craft, and any “master craftsmen who dared to take slave or freed men as apprentices would be punished with a fine.”¹⁷ Though this did not technically affect free black people living in Spain, the widespread association between slavery and blackness often brought suspicions on them, as seen in Aurelia Martín Casares’ example of a widow’s testament stating her lingering suspicion of the two black heirs to whom she chose to will her estate.¹⁸ This mentality would have been especially relevant in the Spanish perception of Don Francisco de Arobe, who was himself the dark-skinned son of an escaped slave. Though the three men from Esmeraldas clearly displayed their wealth and power, their parentage and blackness certainly

¹⁵ Kate Lowe, “The Stereotyping of Black Africans in Renaissance Europe,” in *Black Africans in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Thomas Earle and Kate Lowe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁶ Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 18.

¹⁷ Martín Casares, “Free,” 256-7.

¹⁸ Martín Casares, “Free,” 252.

would have carried deeply negative connotations in Spain and superseded any positive impression due to their clear wealth and status.

The appearance and costume of the Arobe men would have also added to a negative perception due to the existing European stereotypes of black people. As Kate Lowe points out, “actions and behaviours [sic] imbued with neutral or positive meanings in African settings were routinely assigned negative ones in European settings.”¹⁹ While the gold facial adornments of the three men were culturally Andean, Europeans (including the Spanish crown for whom this painting was commissioned) would have had the same reaction to their presence as to the piercings and facial adornments of African peoples, especially because of their phenotypically African traits. In Europe, African slaves were “clothed and adorned to show off the status of their masters. However, white slaves and servants, though similarly clothed, [did] not wear similar jewelry.”²⁰ Lowe argues this difference functioned both to reflect the wealth extracted from Africa as well as to point to the perceived inferiority of Africans who engage in “bodily mutilation,” as Europeans at the time did not have any kind of piercings (unless they were Jewish, which certainly could not have helped the negative perception of Africans). This dual meaning is also applicable in the portrait of the men from Esmeraldas; the gold adornments they wear reflect the wealth of Spain’s new colonies, but they also demonstrate the inferiority of the “savage” people who must be “pacified” and controlled by the Spanish. The gold collar worn by Don Pedro likely also conjured negative associations in the minds of Europeans. As Lowe points out, many of the gold accessories worn by Africans experienced a “changeover” where these high status items would have been read by Europeans as one and the same as the shackles, collars, and chains of the enslaved.²¹ Nevertheless, the excess of gold adornments and fine silk

¹⁹ Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 19.

²⁰ Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 24.

²¹ Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 24.

which was prohibitively expensive in Europe (and often legally banned to any “inferior” person through sumptuary laws), would also have given Europeans the reading of the wealth and status of these men.²² While there is this added layer of complexity with cross-cultural indicators of wealth and status, the overwhelmingly negative connotations for European audiences of the appearance of the Arobe men likely had the greatest effect on their reception in the Spanish court.

All of these negative associations would have been amplified by the enslaved heritage of the three men from Esmeraldas. Other contemporary examples of high-status and well-regarded Africans living in Europe who were formerly enslaved or were the children of an enslaved person carried that stigma with them for the rest of their lives. One example of this is João de Sá Panasco who, despite his successful career as a court fool in Lisbon (even earning the prestigious Order of Santiago), could not escape the derision that came with his dark skin and his status as a former slave.²³ Even African ambassadors and nobles who visited Europe and did not carry this “stigma” of former enslavement were viewed with an air of suspicion and otherization. Despite its long history as a Christian nation and the centuries-long trading history with Italy, Ethiopia was often lumped in with all African foreigners by Italians, which “suggests that difference in skin colour [sic] overrode any other considerations of difference in language or origins.”²⁴ These European preconceptions “allowed Europeans to adopt a position of superiority” over Africans, which was further exacerbated when a noble or ambassador came from a Muslim nation.²⁵ This otherization and believed superiority can be seen within the portraiture created by Europeans for

²² Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 21.

²³ Lowe, “Stereotyping,” 42-3.

²⁴ Kate Lowe, “‘Representing’ Africa: Ambassadors and Princes from Christian Africa to Renaissance Italy and Portugal, 1402–1608,” *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 17 (2007): 119.

²⁵ Lowe, “‘Representing,’” 128.

European audiences of African ambassadors. One example, the portrait of Moroccan ambassador al-Annuri, created for Queen Elizabeth I of England in 1600, provides a striking comparison point for the portrait of Don Francisco and his sons. Like the portrait of the three men from Esmeraldas, the portrait of al-Annuri identifies its subject within the frame of the painting, with Latin text floating next to his head. However, unlike the Moroccan ambassador, the Arobe men (and their names) are compositionally separated from the names of the king and the commissioner by the cartouche, which places them “in a different realm from the pictorial space of the subjects of the portrait, dangerous and uncivilized individuals.”²⁶ In both paintings, there is also special attention paid to the ethnic features and “exotic” clothing of the subjects. While the artist emphasizes the ambassador’s wealth through the delicate rendering of the fine white linen, intricately woven strap and elaborate sword, the attention to the foreign, “exotic” style “conveys a deep sense of alterity through cultural and ethnic distance.”²⁷ Both portraits were also created in attempts to solidify relations between groups or nations and both, because of underlying tensions at the time, share elements of unease within their composition. The unease within al-Annuri’s portrait is more obvious; as Kate Lowe points out, his expression is “a half-smile and a hard sideways glance, al-Annuri could be seen to embody the cunning and cruelty often imputed by Europeans to Muslims,” however he is still rendered with clear respect to his status and wealth.²⁸ The tension within the portrait of the three men from Esmeraldas only truly becomes apparent with the context of just how unusual it was for a portrait like this, which was created to show their submission and deference to the Spanish throne, to have its central figures prominently wielding weapons. It is clear that, if these assumptions and prejudices were still

²⁶ Cummins, “Three,” 121.

²⁷ Kate Lowe, “Visual Representations of an Elite: African Ambassadors and Rulers in Renaissance Europe,” in *Revealing the African Presence in Renaissance Europe*, ed. Joaneath Spicer (Baltimore: The Walters Art Museum, 2012), 103.

²⁸ Lowe, “Visual,” 103.

present even in the portraiture of the “most respectable” dark-skinned people (at least, in the eyes of Europeans), they would inevitably have shaped the Spanish perception and understanding of Don Francisco and his sons.

Though the overall impression Europeans would have received from the hybridity of the costume worn by Don Francisco and his sons was likely overwhelmingly negative, this was not the only message present in this portrait. While the Spanish saw the three men as an “exotic other,” the painting also captures the Arobe’s assertion of autonomy through their clothing and adornments. From the Spanish point of view, the strangeness of their dress likely evoked parallels to the “commissioned copies of these portraits of foreign rulers in order to have a pictorial record of ‘exotic’ potentates, visually complementing the exotic and luxury objects displayed in their *Kunstkammern*.”²⁹ As evidenced by the painting’s years spent gathering dust in the royal archives, the Spanish king probably saw these men’s “exotic” appearance both in their costume and their dark skin as another strange curio that he owned, bolstering the wealth and prestige of his empire. The painting was simply a record of the success of his subject’s “pacification” of the exotic other. However, in the American context, things were not so simple; the Arobe men, Gallque, and especially the Spanish colonial government were, to different extents, all working to establish this “new race” of “mulatto” that lacked “a traditional pictorial genre of representation to which Galque has any recall.”³⁰ Within the context of the painting, this “new category” was reflected within the hybrid clothing of the central figures, which in its refusal to conform to any one culture, makes “what kind of men these men are is not clear, not in their representation, not in their race, not in their political belonging.”³¹ To the Spanish, “the mulatto is a new and unstable category, outside any clear recognition other than being

²⁹ Lowe, “Visual,” 110-1

³⁰ Cummins, “Three,” 129.

³¹ Cummins, “Three,” 133.

dangerous,” and must be documented and controlled for the benefit of the king.³² And yet, while the portrait functions to convey Don Francisco’s deference to the Spanish throne, it also functions as an assertion of their identity and power outside of Spanish control, which is, at least in part, conveyed through their clothing and adornments. These three men, with “their faces and their bodies, as they appear adorned here, transgress the king’s law.”³³ If Don Francisco and his sons with their dark skin and enslaved heritage were dressed in these excessive, luxurious garments and adornments in Spain, they would be in clear violation of sumptuary laws. However, their position as quasi-independent leaders who were a very real threat to Spanish control of the region and its labor allowed them to cross this boundary and maintain a level of prestige and status that would otherwise be inaccessible to them. Additionally, as Baltasar Fra-Molinero argues, “the presence of the raised spears is a demonstration of triumph,” as this was a very unusual appearance within this kind of portraiture.³⁴ While they can be read as a demonstration to the king that these men are now in service to the Spanish crown, it is also a reminder of the clear threat they pose to Spanish colonial control. Another element of this portrait that has a dual message of deference and defiance exists in the gold adornments worn by the men from Esmeraldas. While they are markers of status both in Andean cultural terms and in those that can be understood by the Spanish, they are also signs of the wealth the Spanish had both gained from their colonial possession and that which they could not have. Within the context of the painting, these adornments are gilded with the extracted wealth of the Spanish colony, but the actual gold remains in the possession of the Arobes. Although the Spanish held nominal control of this prosperous region and did reap significant economic benefits from it, the

³² Cummins, “Three,” 136.

³³ Cummins, “Three,” 137.

³⁴ Baltasar Fra-Molinero, “A Postcard from Wakanda to the King of Spain: The Portrait of the Mulatos de Esmeraldas (1599),” in *Trajectories of Empire: Transhispanic Reflections on the African Diaspora*, ed. Jerome Branche (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2022), 146.

presence of these golden adornments to which they had no claim reflects the fact that they did not have full control over these men and their people.³⁵ This complex intermingling of messaging within the portrait parallels the historical moment's delicate balance of power which created the circumstances for its commission.

This negotiation of power and the development of a new category of people seen in the *Portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and Sons Pedro and Domingo* establishes a foundation of visual language upon which the Spanish colonial project would build in the upcoming century. Where the Arobe men manage to assert their identity and power despite the concessions and deference to the Spanish throne, later depictions of mixed-race people use the visual language of hybrid clothing and markers of identity to artificially construct racial categories with which to oppress and denigrate them. The clearest application of these hybrid forms appears in the trend of *casta* paintings, predominantly created in eighteenth-century Mexico. *Casta* paintings typically take the form of a set of sixteen paintings by the same artist of families composed of racially different parents and their offspring, with labels indicating the races of each.³⁶ The sixteen “portraits” are organized into a larger sequence that demonstrates the imposed social hierarchy of races within the Spanish colonies. While each parent and child is taxonomically labeled, they are also visually indicated through their hybrid clothing; the families and generations that are further down the hierarchy (i.e further away from the “Spanish prototype”) appear in far fewer Spanish elements and the closer they get to “blackness,” the more they are “polluted,” wearing more indigenous elements, with clothing that is distinctly ragged and dirty. This visually reinforces the widespread belief that, while native ancestry could be “overcome” by intermarriage, blackness

³⁵ Fra-Molinero, “Postcard,” 148.

³⁶ Rebecca Earle, “The Pleasures of Taxonomy: *Casta* Paintings, Classification, and Colonialism,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2016): 428.

“utterly prohibits any return to whiteness or Spanishness.”³⁷ Unlike the portrait of Don Francisco and his sons where the subjects had a hand in crafting their visual identity, casta paintings were propagandistic creations by the colonial elite which actively constructed discrete categories of people. In reality, race within the actual society of Spanish colonial America were flexible and context dependent, but one factor was always true: the further away from the “Spanish ideal” and the closer one was to the “savage” native or African, the lower one would be in the racial hierarchy. As Joaneath Spicer points out when discussing blackness in Renaissance Europe, “dark or black skin [when set against a norm of whiteness] functioned as a visible marker of social difference and diminishment with many consequences” and this was certainly applicable to Spanish colonial American life.³⁸

The *Portrait of Don Francisco de Arobe and Sons Pedro and Domingo*, and more specifically the clothing and adornment of its central figures, allows us to get a small glimpse into the complex tapestry of political, societal, and racial negotiations occurring in early Spanish colonial America. The painting captures a moment in history where the growing discriminatory mentality against black people during the Renaissance began to germinate into the pseudoscientific racial categories that would dominate the Americas in the centuries to come.

³⁷ Earle, “Pleasures,” 448.

³⁸ Spicer, “European,” 40.

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