



JAIME EGUIGUREN

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The González Brothers

(17th and 18th centuries)

**VIRGIN
OF ATOCHA**

End of the 17th century – start of the 18th century

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Oil and mother-of-pearl on panel
28 x 18.8 cm / 45 x 36 cm with frame

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In 1756, the prominent painter from Oaxaca, Miguel Cabrera, wrote a decidedly unusual book which, in true Baroque style, he entitled “American marvel and ensemble of rare wonders, observed with the direction of the rules of the Art of Painting in the prodigious image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico, by Don Miguel Cabrera, painter to His Most Illustrious Señor Don Manuel Joseph Rubio, and Salinas, Most Honourable Archbishop of Mexico and the Council of Your Majesty, etc., to whom it is consecrated. With licence: In Mexico at the Printing House of the Royal, and Oldest, College of San Ildefonso, in the year 1756.”

The book’s purpose was to analyse the artistic characteristics, in Cabrera’s opinion, of the painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe, following my rigorous examination of it, having it in front of me. As such, the American Marvel was essentially based on the physical analysis of the painting of this Virgin, housed, as it still is to this day, in Mexico City, and which in the opinion of Miguel Cabrera, was worthy of admiration “in accordance with the rules of the art of painting”, this subject, the Virgin, being highly prized by the two González artists, as we shall see shortly.

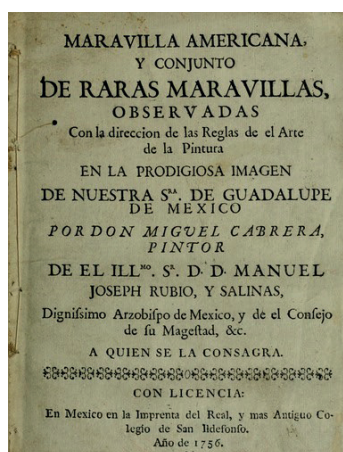


Fig. 1 Facsimile of the cover of the book by the painter Miguel Cabrera. Mexico, 1756.

It is worth recalling that, according to Novohispanic tradition, in 1531 the painting of the Virgin of Guadalupe was shown to the then Bishop of Mexico, Friar Juan de Zumárrago, by Juan Diego, a native of Coatitlan, which at that time bordered Lake Texcoco in Mexico, and on whose “tilma” the Virgin miraculously appeared. As an aside, during his visit to the great Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico, Pope Juan Paul II would beatify Juan Diego on 6 May 1990 (Fig. 1).

If we mention this now, it is because the two related artists (who in fact were the brothers Juan and Miguel González, resident in Mexico City, and known at the time as “makie and inlay painters” due to their incomparable use of mother-of-pearl and the prodigious technique they employed in their many works), now represent an American marvel to paraphrase, as it were, the title of Cabrera’s abovementioned book.

One of the first Mexican art researchers to shed light on Novohispanic paintings featuring mother-of-pearl inlay was Manuel Toussaint. In 1952, to be exact, he made reference to two painters with the surname González, and even went so far, after much consideration, to posit the possibility that they were from New Spain. His position, however, was that until some piece of documentary evidence emerged to demonstrate the Mexican origin of the brothers, the subject would remain up in the air.

In his benchmark study entitled: Mother-of-pearl inlay paintings in New Spain,¹ Toussaint observed the dilemma regarding the origin and analysis of Miguel and Juan González. He did, however, point out that the magazine “Contemporáneos” had, through Alfonso Reyes, revealed a series of panels signed by the first of the two artists, Miguel, depicting numerous Episodes from the Conquest of Mexico, which are currently part of the Buenos Aires Museum of Fine Arts collection.

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Fig. 2 Scene of the Conquest of Mexico: Miguel and Juan González, 1698. The description of them, in the upper and lowers parts, analyses the events of the Conquest. Currently housed at the Museum of America in Spain, in a series of 24 works. Panel 4.



Fig. 3 Scene of the Conquest of Mexico: Miguel and Juan González, 1698. The description of them, in the upper and lowers parts, analyses the events of the Conquest. Currently housed at the Museum of America in Spain, in a series of 24 works. Panel 10.

Toussaint's contribution was also extremely significant in the information he presented in his work, as he devoted part of it to an examination of the archives of the Mexico City Ordinary Mayors and Magistrates, before whom witness trials were carried out, enabling him to review inventory documents and wills. He thereby discovered that the estate records of the inhabitants of Mexico City included details of mother-of-pearl inlay works belonging to private collections.

The following is a brief summary of this list: two mother-of-pearl panels with their moulding; three mother-of-pearl and make engravings depicting different saints with frames of the same; one mother-of-pearl engraving depicting Our Lady of the Conception and one of Our Lady of the Remedies; two mother-of-pearl engravings depicting the Prayer in the Garden and Jesus of Nazareth; one mother-of-pearl work depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe; one panel depicting Our Lady of Guadalupe with three-quarter mother-of-pearl, etc.

In Toussaint's opinion, the paintings with mother-of-pearl inlay were executed between around 1692 and 1752, but this reference is inexact given that it simply reflects the period for which he analysed the archives of Ordinary Mayors, that is to say from 1692 to 1752.

It is important to note that the works of the González brothers are housed at the Museum of America in Madrid, the National History Museum, INAH, and other museums such as the Franz Mayer in Mexico City, others in the US and in private collections (Fig. 2 & 3).

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Fig. 4 Juan González, *Nativity*, 1662. 32.5cm x 41cm. Smithsonian American Art Museum.

One thing worth bearing mind about Miguel and Juan González is that not all of their works are signed. Of those signed by Juan we could, for example, point to the Virgin of Valvanera, kept at Madrid's Museum of America, and likewise to his *Nativity*, signed in 1662, belonging to the Smithsonian Institute in Washington.

The works signed and dated by Juan González date from around 1662 to 1703, and those of Miguel, from around 1692 to 1698. The two belonged to the Novohispanic Painters' Guild, which was rightly generous in its praise of the excellent work and quality of the pieces produced in their Mexico City workshop (Fig. 4).

As mentioned earlier, some of the works from the series relating the Episodes of the Conquest of Mexico are signed by Miguel González alone, and are housed at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Buenos Aires, and the panel *The Allegories on the Creed*, which is at the National Museum of History, INAH, in Mexico. There are also works signed by both of them, in 1698, for example in the *Episodes of the Conquest*, of a historical nature, reproduced here and kept at the Museum of America in Madrid.

As we said, Juan González's signed and dated works are from around 1662 to 1703, while those by Miguel date from around 1692 to 1698. They both signed works that they did not date, and often left their works unsigned, which was extremely common given the amount of work they were commissioned to do, either for display at private residences or for public viewing, with paintings displayed at churches in Mexico, probably including the one in Tlazoyaltepec, Oaxaca.

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The same can be said of the unsigned works of numerous painters from Mexico's colonial period, the most well-known case being that of Miguel Cabrera in the 18th century.

The period relating to mother-of-pearl inlay works probably did not stretch beyond 100 years (around 1650 to 1750), but Miguel, and to a lesser extent Juan González, have always been linked to this art form. As already mentioned, Manuel Toussaint concluded that the two were probably colonial artists. The number of these paintings still surviving in Mexico is proof that their production levels in New Spain were considerable, and the González signature, visible on a number of paintings, shows that they were the most prolific authors of this unique Novohispanic painting genre; a genre and type of painter, as I said at the outset, that should be seen as marvellous or as an American Marvel.

Other authors, without any real evidence, suppose that these artists might have come from an Asian (Chinese or Japanese) background!

Sonia I. Ocaña Ruiz observes that these artists were working in Mexico City in the late 17th and early 18th centuries. She also adds that they were prolific, signing nearly a third of the more than 250 works we know them to have produced. These artists often based their works on the European engravings, often presenting marked Mannerist tendencies, which arrived in New Spain from the numerous printing houses in Frankfurt, and which frequently reproduced the engraving works of Maerten de Vos or Raphael Sadeler. It is highly likely that many of the 160 or so anonymous works featuring mother-of-pearl inlay that currently exist may be attributed to the González brothers and their workshop.

In 1986, we were lucky enough to benefit from one of the best and most reliable sources of information on the González brothers, based on the analysis of documentary sources, courtesy of the great, sadly-departed Mexican historian, Guillermo Tovar de Teresa, who shed light on the problem relating to the identity of the González artists, and how their works reached Spain at the end of the 17th century. The documents (3) he presents, which the reader can consult, "categorically prove the Mexican origin of the González painters". Drawing on said documents, we learn that Tomás González de Villaverde was the father of the brothers Juan González de Mier and Miguel González.

They had a family workshop in Mexico City, specialising in makie and mother-of-pearl inlay techniques. Their panels, the historian informs us, were lined with linen, on top of which a paste was applied on which the drawing was executed and the mother-of-pearl pieces were arranged. Next the final drawing was made and delicate layers of multi-coloured glaze were applied and, finally, the surface of the works were polished and lacquered until a smooth shiny sheen was attained. The golden, yellowy effect may have been obtained using saffron (Fig. 5).²

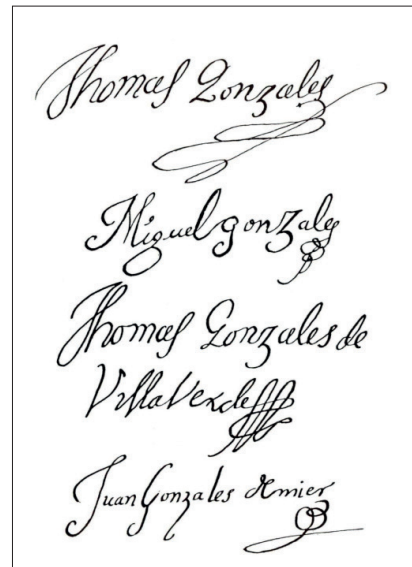


Fig. 5 Facsimiles of the signatures of the González family, as they appear in the documents published by the historian Guillermo Tovar de Teresa.

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The same document mentions that the workshop, specialising in “paintings and inlay”, also undertook works to be exported and sold on the Spanish peninsula by a “Factor”, or merchant. It is important to bear in mind that these contracts, requiring the González brothers to deliver their painting and inlay works, were for significant quantities. One delivery order document from 1699 mentions “three panels with painting and inlay, made of mother-of-pearl, measuring a yard and a quarter square, which should be of the same quality and inlay as one of Saint Anthony which was undertaken as a sample and is in the possession of said Juan González, paid for by said Factor, so that it may serve as a model and guideline for the others that are to be executed depicting events and images as required. And those thereby included should be completed to a price of 26 pesos each, to be paid by said Factor. Furthermore, a further 14 panels, with the same measurement and shape as another work that was commissioned as a sample depicting Our Lady of the Conception...”

This document uncovered by Guillermo Tovar concludes with the legal obligations of the two parties:

“And in safeguarding compliance on the part of the two parties, in as far as the obligation regarding their persons and goods received and to be received, they are subject to the authority and jurisdiction of the Judges and Magistrates with regard any legal claim either might have and of which they must have knowledge in compliance with the law, so that they be compelled and obliged to comply with what has been agreed as if a ruling had been passed and judged upon. Mexico, 14 December, 1699”.

The González brothers lived in Mexico City along with their father, Tomás, who was also a master lacquer worker, and the brothers started to produce their works in the family workshop in the capital of New Spain. It is likely that their business focussed primarily on Mexico City.

The González workshop specialised in this sort of mother-of-pearl inlay paintings in Mexico City, rightly earning both popularity and reputation. Their output matched the deluge of orders received for both public and private worship when it came to their religious works, as well as works depicting events, such as historical ones, as seen in the extensive series on the Conquest of Mexico, as mentioned earlier. Whether signed or unsigned, their works were a shining beacon attesting to New Spain’s conciliatory plurality.

The works coming out of the González workshop brought together New Spain with the Orient, a distant mirror of a developing society that would win its independence in 1821. The influence of Oriental art is noticeable in these pieces in the mother-of-pearl inlay technique. Let us not forget that, under Spanish rule, in 1573 the Philippines became a trade hub and point of exchange, where Chinese junks and Japanese vessels would arrive laden down with merchandise, and from that point on, for the next three centuries, crafts following the so-called Galeón de Manila or Nao de China trade routes would transport an endless stream of oriental items to Mexico, and to the port of Acapulco in particular, for distribution throughout New Spain.

Trade was so intense between New Spain and the Orient that, for example, the “Indian Company” dinner service, which was so widely used in New Spain, was made in the Orient, in the city of Jingdezhen to be exact. Indian Company porcelain was in particularly high demand among the Novohispanic elite, following the fashion of European tastes. There is no doubt that this opulent art form had a powerful influence on the tastes of Mexican society during that period.

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Fig. 6 CHEST Tortoiseshell with mother-of-pearl and ivory, Mexican work with Oriental influence. Anonymous, Mexico, 18th century.

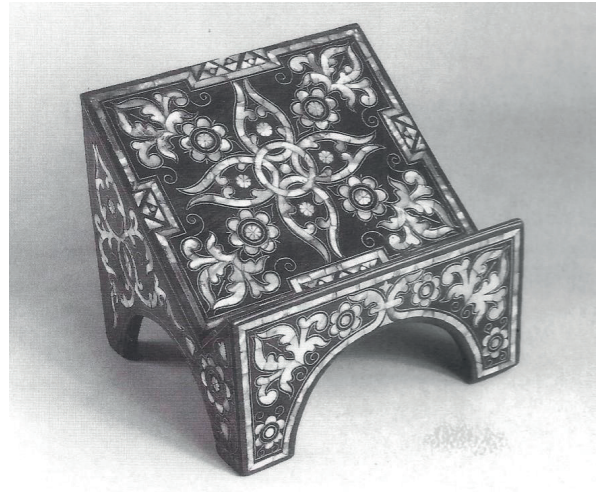


Fig. 7 LECTERN Mother-of-pearl inlay, Mexican work with Oriental influence. Anonymous, Mexico, 18th century.



Fig. 8 Detail of a "bargueño" cabinet with mother-of-pearl inlay, Mexico 17th century, Franz Mayer Museum

Their wide range of subject areas, particularly those that bear witness to historical events (such as in the Conquest of Mexico series), mean we can now fully appreciate these marvellous works of art, distant mirrors, let us say it once again, and yet also intimate. The art of the González brothers is the expression of a living past. As with the major workshops of the Renaissance and New Spain, other artisans from their workshop would have been involved in the execution of these works, or may have finished many of their pieces. That helps to explain why so many were left with neither date nor signature (Fig. 6, 7 & 8).

The diversity of the González brothers' mother-of-pearl inlay paintings gives us an insight into just how wide-ranging the iconography present in their works was. In their oeuvre we can identify major series depicting historical events, along with a host of images representing religious motifs: Saint Andrew, Saint James the Greater, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint John the Baptist, Saint Philip, Saint Bartholomew, Saint Matthew, Saint Thomas and Saint James the Lesser, etc. There are also scenes depicting the life of Christ, that of the Virgin Mary, and a number of individual paintings such as the varied images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, which were commissioned in the workshop.

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Virgin of Atocha – Virgin with Child

This work includes one unsigned painting with mother-of-pearl inlay which, given the way they have been executed and their excellent quality, lead us to suggest that it came out of the González workshop, though it is extremely difficult to ascertain which of the two brothers was the artist behind each one. The *Virgin of Atocha* measures 28 cm x 18.8 cm without frame, and 45 cm x 36 cm with frame. This is more certainly a work carried out on commission and aimed, as we mentioned earlier, at private worship. It is important to point out that the paintings' frame also boast the same mother-of-pearl inlay technique, with decorative motifs including a simple combination of flowers, petals and varying birds.

The motif of the Virgin and Child has been taken from the sculpture of the Virgin of Atocha in the Basilica of Our Lady of Atocha in Madrid (Fig. 9). In primitive times when the prevailing custom was to dress religious images, the Virgin of Atocha, dressed and covered in opulent robes with just her face and hands bare, looked almost life-size. Currently, stripped of her robes, the image looks like a non-polychrome wooden statuette, sat on a throne, the symbol of royalty and the seat of knowledge.

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blessing the people, with his index and middle finger extended while the rest are bent inwards onto the palm of his hand, in the style of Eastern Church worship.

The Virgin's face is very dark, almost black. She has big, almond eyes, and bears a carved crown, which was later replaced with gold and silver ones.

This marvellous painting with mother-of-pearl inlay is true to the original iconography of the Virgin of Atocha. The mother-of-pearl inlay is arranged on the clothes of the Virgin and the Infant, thereby recreating the rich robes possessed by the Virgin. On these irregular pieces of mother-of-pearl, oil paint and gilding has been used to depict the folds and varying details making up the rich quilting of the Virgin of Atocha's opulent attire.

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Fig.9 *Virgin of Atocha*, Basilica of Our Lady of Atocha, Madrid.

The crescent moon held by the angel on the base is also encrusted with mother-of-pearl. The mother-of-pearl inlay reflects the light thereby lending the work a special sort of iridescent luminosity.

The faces of the Virgin and the Infant are oil-painted in a dark brown colour. The crown and radiance are painted in the same manner. Like the painting, the frame presents mother-of-pearl inlay and oil paint, depicting delicate flowers and birds.

The frame once again presents the same mother-of-pearl inlay technique as the painting, which shows that both painting and frame were closely related, each going with the other.

Generally speaking, frames were highly prized in New Spain. They were made using all sorts of techniques and materials, with mother-of-pearl inlay being particularly popular, along with marquetry, carved wood, silver and glass. The wooden chests made in Mexico in the 17th and 18th centuries have tortoiseshell, mother-of-pearl and bone inlay.

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The Mother-of-Pearl inlay Painting technique in New Spain

As commented above, these paintings were executed at the end of the 17th century and start of the 18th century. They mark a fundamental milestone in colonial art and culture in New Spain. The González brothers were not the only artists developing this technique, and we can now also point to the works of Nicolás Correa, Antonio de Santander and Agustín del Pino. What is true, however, is that the González brothers had the biggest mother-of-pearl inlay workshop in Mexico City, carrying out the largest number of commissions.

We have already mentioned that this technique was characterised by the encrustation of pieces of mother-of-pearl of varying sizes and shapes adapted to a drawing previously sketched out on a wooden panel. The drawing would be traced out on the base so as to serve as a model for using glue to apply the little pieces of mother-of-pearl across the different areas, whether depicting architectural elements or the clothes of the figures represented, as well as a range of decorative motifs such as flowers and birds, as the scene required. Next a preparatory base was applied onto which a second drawing was traced out with ornamental and iconographic motifs.

The carnation of the figures and the landscape surroundings and buildings (based on engravings) were executed in oil paint, as were the faces of the angels or saints, the hands or bodies of those depicted or the different animals present. In short, oil paint was used to recreate whatever could not be done with mother-of-pearl (Figs. 10, 11, 12 & 13).



Fig. 10 Workshop of the González brothers. *Embrace at the Golden Gate*, series on the *Life of the Virgin*, end of the 17th century to start of the 18th century, oil and mother-of-pearl inlay on wooden panel, 97cm x 68cm. Museum of America, Madrid.



Fig. 11 Workshop of the González brothers. *Saint John the Evangelist*, end of the 17th to the start of the 18th century. Mother-of-pearl inlay on wooden panel. Soumay Museum, Mexico

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Fig. 12 Detail of an enconchado Jewelry Chest Painted by Miguel or Juan González (attributed) Viceroyalty of New Spain (Mexico)



Fig. 13 Miguel Gonzalez, *Virgin of Guadalupe*, end of 17th century to start of 18th century, oil paint with mother-of-pearl inlay on wooden panel, 124.46cm x 95.25cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art

Notes

- 1 MANUEL TOUSSAINT, "Mother-of-pearl inlay paintings in New Spain", National Autonomous University of Mexico. *Annals of the Institute of Aesthetic Research*, number 20, Mexico 1972. pp. 5 - 20. The technique and subject of inlay paintings have already been addressed by a number of authors, and we may well conclude that one of the first was Manuel Romero de Terreros, whose book *Industrial Arts in New Spain* already mentioned the series of 24 panels in the Museum of America in Madrid, dating them to 1608. Genaro Estrada did likewise in 1933, and Alfonso Reyes in 1934, and since then studies on mother-of-pearl inlay works and the artists Miguel and Juan González have been numerous: MARTHA DUJOVNE. *Paintings with mother-of-pearl inlay*. National Autonomous University of Mexico. Mexico, 1984. SONIA I. OCAÑA RUIZ, "Inlay frames: autonomy and appropriation of Japanese art forms in the painting of New Spain". National Autonomous University of Mexico, *Annals of the Institute of Aesthetic Research*, number 92, Mexico, 2008. GABRIELA GARCÍA LASCURAIN VARGAS, "News regarding mother-of-pearl inlay paintings and painters in Oaxaca". National Autonomous University of Mexico. *Annals of the Institute of Aesthetic Research*. Volume 33. Number 98. Year 2011. SONIA I. OCAÑA RUIZ, "Mother-of-pearl inlay works: tastes, strategies and prices in New Spain". *Annals of the Institute of Aesthetic Research*. Volume 37. Number 106. Year 2015. Much of this essay takes into account these references on the Art of Painting in New Spain, referred to as "Enconchados".
- 2 GUILLERMO TOVAR DE TERESA. "Documents about 'enconchados' and the Mexican González family", *Cuadernos de Arte Colonial*, Museum of America, October 1986, No. 1, pp. 97 – 103.

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