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Vicente Albán (attr.)

Quito (Ecuador), 1723 - after 1796

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circa 1783/1785

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Oil on canvas
78.3 x 97.2 cm

Provenance: Louis Hermann Collection (1877 - 1959), presumed to have been obtained by his sister Amélie (1883 - 1954) and brother-in-law Enrique Freymann (1888 - 1954), cultural attaché in Mexico, then by descent.

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Since the arrival of the Spanish in America in the 16th century, interaction between indigenous people, Europeans and Africans was inevitable. In the 17th and 18th centuries, mestizaje was consolidated as a structural process in colonial society that was not only limited to the biological mixture between ethnic groups, but also involved a complex dynamic of social stratification.

To manage this racial diversity, the Spanish Crown established a caste system that classified individuals according to their ancestry and level of blood "purity." This system was hierarchically structured. At the top were peninsular Spaniards and Creoles—with access to high positions and privileges; followed by mestizos, mulattoes, and intermediate castes—with restricted access to certain rights and jobs; and finally indigenous people and African slaves—subject to taxes and legal limitations.

In the Audiencia of Quito, the upper class was made up of a minority of Spanish origin and their descendants born in America, known as criollos. Within this group, certain individuals managed to occupy the highest positions in the state administration, represent local interests through the Cabildo and achieve prestigious positions within the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The white group, however, was not homogeneous, since the mestizaje and the diversity of cultural traditions contributed to its heterogeneity.¹ Between this social and economic elite, and the indigenous people and slaves who occupied the lowest levels of society, the group of mestizos and castes was articulated, increasingly numerous and visible in the cities.

During the Baroque, the painting workshops were under the protection of the Church and religious orders, although some of the commissions also responded to the personal demand of the social elites. In this context, a pictorial genre characteristic of the viceregal territories emerged: caste painting. Its origins respond to the need of high society to classify and hierarchize the population through a caste system, reflecting enlightened concerns about social and racial classification. The paintings were usually composed in series of up to sixteen scenes, each showing a family nucleus with parents of different ethnic origins and their children, with inscriptions identifying the resulting caste. The main commissions came from viceregal officials, enlightened intellectuals and members of the New Spanish nobility, but also from the Viceroyalty of Peru and the Audience of Quito, who sent them to Spain as visual documents of the social order in America. Notable artists such as Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexico, 1675-1728) (Fig. 1), Miguel Cabrera (Mexico, 1710-1768), or Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz (Mexico, 1713-1772) (Fig. 2) made series of castas with a close and true look, emphasizing the clothing or personal adornments of those represented. To date, more than one hundred and twenty sets of this genre have been counted, today belonging to museums and collections around the world.

1 García Sáiz, Concepción, *American Mestizaje*, Museum of America, Madrid, Ministry of Culture, 1985, pp. 27-28.

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Fig. 1. Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexico, 1675-1728), *From Spain and India comes a Mestizo*, oil on canvas. Private collection.



Fig. 2. Juan Patricio Morlete Ruiz (Mexico, 1713-1772), *VII. From Spanish and Moorish: Albino*, ca. 1760, oil on canvas. Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Along with these series of castas that were produced during the 18th century, there were other ways of seeing and interpreting the American world, mainly associated with the Quito school of painting, through the painting of local types. In this context, the figure of the master Vicente Albán (Quito, ca. 1723-1796) stands out. From his hand came two series of six paintings each, practically identical, focused on the representation of different characters inspired by Quito society: one signed, belonging to the Museum of America in Madrid, and another made up of four privately owned canvases, and two more in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA). In them, the protagonists, dressed and adorned according to the fashion in force in the Audiencia of Quito, appear in open landscapes that include various native natural elements, especially fruit trees. Fruit hangs from their branches, some of them depicted open and in large size, thus allowing their characteristics to be appreciated in detail. This approach responds to the scientific purpose of the Spanish Crown to better understand its natural resources, since numerous expeditions were financed that traveled through a large part of America, providing valuable information for the classification of the different kingdoms of nature.

Several scholars have linked the Museo de América in Madrid's collection to the Spanish botanist José Celestino Mutis (1732-1808), director of the Royal Botanical Expedition of the New Kingdom of Granada² (1783-1816), as a gift to the Royal Cabinet of Natural History in Madrid, created in 1771. However, it is not certain whether the LACMA series was also commissioned by him. Requests for replicas were part of the image culture of the time, and it was not uncommon for Spanish officials to request copies of the same image. Furthermore, artists often copied their own paintings, which occupied an important place in their workshops.

Despite the scant biographical information on Vicente Albán, it is known that he often collaborated with his brother Francisco Albán (1742-1788), and that both were considered among the most prominent Quito painters of the time. According to expert Ilona Katzew, the LACMA paintings – despite not being signed – are very similar to the Madrid works, although they present subtle formal and

² Spanish viceregal jurisdiction in northern South America, which corresponds mainly to present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela.

stylistic differences. The Madrid set is executed with more freedom and possibly by more than one hand, suggesting that it was created with the help of a workshop. The figures in the LACMA paintings, on the other hand, seem to be better placed in space and are more restrained in their treatment of details³.

Regarding the wonderful work in question, the theme represented leads to a symbiosis between caste painting and the costumbrista genre, in relation to the social traditions of America, and particularly to marriage. Scenes of celebrations linked to marriage were common in 18th century painting, where *costumbrismo* was captured both on canvas and adapted to the landscape format of screens in the New Spain area,⁴ but not in the Quito context, where this work is a rarity in the genre. More common was – immersed in enlightened thought – the taking of notes and drawings from life of local types by Spanish intellectuals and artists such as Felipe Bauzá (1764-1834) who, during his time at the Audience of Quito, took the opportunity to portray the clothing and the hierarchy that this implied in Quito society, a faithful testimony of both the elites (Fig. 3) and the humblest classes (Fig. 4).

Against an open landscape with a sky-blue background, the artist places three local characters in the foreground with the idea of accurately portraying the types of late colonial society north of the Andes. In the center, an elegant lady from the Creole elite, with pale skin and richly dressed, and with a Castilian rose in her hand, seems to be gesturing to welcome the man who has come to ask for the hand of the woman on the left of the composition. The scene shows two social realities in Quito, differentiated through the ostentation of their clothing.

The central lady catches everyone's attention. She is dressed in the Quito fashion established at the end of the 18th century, derived in part from the European trends of the time, with a short, wide-flowing skirt, made of fine blue vegetal lace with white trim - a garment repeatedly censured by the ecclesiastical authorities who considered it contrary to decorum. Over the skirt, she wears another with gold brocade and a red background with ornamental motifs inspired by vegetal elements, and a bodice with wide, puffed sleeves slashed with gold trim. She is also adorned with numerous jewels that, in variety, design and functionality, also respond to a very Andean taste, such as shoes with a double gold-bordered brooch, a headdress of braids



Fig. 3. Attr. to Felipe Bauzá (1764-1834), *Limeña*, 1793, pen and wash on paper, Museum of America, Madrid.



Fig. 4. Attr. to Felipe Bauzá (1764-1834), *Indian chief of Quito*, 1793, pen and wash on paper, Museum of America, Madrid.

3 Katzew, Ilona (ed.), *Archive of the World: Art and Imagination in Spanish America, 1500–1800*, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2022, pp. 209-210.

4 An example of this is the painting *Marriage of Indians*, circa 1720, attributed to Juan Rodríguez Juárez (Mexico, 1675-1728), Museum of America, Madrid, no. 2002/01/01.

gathered at the sides with a floral-adorned tiara, earrings according to the model made of gold and precious stones, a choker with a diamond decoration around the neck, a beautiful gold pendant, rings on her hands, or the traditional *manillas* or bracelets with eight rows of pearls and two gold bracelets on her wrists.⁵ These elements are closely related to the attire of the protagonist of the painting “Principal Lady with her Black Slave” in the Museum of America in Madrid (Fig. 5), reflecting the ostentation typical of the Creole elites through the decorative overload of her skirt and the accessories of metals and precious stones (Fig. 6).

The future wife, on the other hand, has a darker complexion, but again her presence and formal attire denote that she is part of the native elite. She wears a brown skirt with gold stripes and white lace at the bottom, a white bodice with wide sleeves and blue lace borders, and a black cloak with a kind of white shawl on top. The cloak is held in place by a *tupu* or *tipqui*, gilded in the shape of a radiant sun – a decorative pin of pre-Hispanic origin that remained in use, although transformed, after the Spanish conquest. Among her accessories, several necklaces and bracelets made of pearls and coral beads stand out. Her clothing can again be related to another of the canvases in the Madrid series, specifically to “Indian in gala dress” (Fig. 7), both featuring an elegant *tupu* as a brooch for her cloak (Fig. 8).



Fig. 5. Vicente Albán (Quito, ca. 1723-1796), *Principal Lady with her Black Slave*, 1783, oil on canvas, Museum of America, Madrid.



Fig. 6 comparison with attr. Vicente Albán, *The Marriage Proposal* (dress detail), circa 1783/1785. Jaime Eguiguen Art & Antiques

⁵ Arbeteta Mira, Leticia, “Iconographic precisions on some paintings in the collection of the Museum of America, based on the study of the jewelry represented”, in *Annals of the Museum of America*, No. 15, 2007, p. 157.

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the right side of the scene. He has just removed his hat in a sign of respect, showing the inside of the cup as a sign of his readiness to comply with the orders of his superiors. His austere black suit reveals white lace breeches that cover his knees, while his shirt stands out in contrast to the darkness of his black uncu.⁶ The only additional adornment is the golden buckles that fasten his equally black shoes. It is worth mentioning the appearance of a domesticated Andean camelid in a walking attitude – perhaps a llama or alpaca – as an indication of his profession as a shepherd or muleteer. Similarly, the figure of this character has its parallel in one of the paintings signed by Vicente Albán, “Chief Indian of Quito in gala dress” (Fig. 9), sharing the white lace breeches and the dark suit over them (Fig. 10).

One of the most notable peculiarities of the work has to do with the conventionality used when outlining the facial features of the three characters, who present an elegant and idealized appearance, to the point of having a similar physiognomy. For this reason, the painter resorted to other resources to distinguish their identity, through the tone of the skin or the clothing, which, together with the position on the canvas, the gestures and attitude, make clear the superior hierarchical position of the Creole woman with respect to the two natives, who are placed one step behind –in the case of the future wife– or paying a certain homage –the suitor–.



Fig. 7. Vicente Albán (Quito, ca. 1723-1796), *Indian Woman in Gala Dress*, 1783, oil on canvas, Museum of America, Madrid.



Fig. 8 comparison with attr. Vicente Albán, *The Marriage Proposal* (dress detail), circa 1783/1785. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

⁶ Long, rectangular tunic, very similar to a poncho, which was wrapped around the body and held in place with a belt called a chumpi.

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In conclusion, we are faced with a composition different from all those previously mentioned, far removed from the scientific purposes of the Enlightenment – as it lacks natural elements, labels and inscriptions – but undoubtedly contemporary in time, and in favour of the concern to make social reality visible through images; a great discovery that raises new avenues for future research into the activity of Vicente Albán and his workshop in the emergence of South American colonial costumbrismo.



Fig. 9 Vicente Albán (Quito, ca. 1723-1796), *Principal Indian of Quito in Gala Dress*, 1783, oil on canvas, Museum of America, Madrid.



Fig. 10 comparison with attr. Vicente Albán, *The Marriage Proposal* (dress detail), circa 1783/1785. Jaime Eguiguren Art & Antiques

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