

The Case of the Lost Painting

A full-fledged mystery had dropped into the lap of LACMA.

LOS ANGELES, CA, UNITED STATES, December 1, 2017 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is currently involved in an art mystery that is worthy of a detective novel: an important long-lost painting seems to be hiding somewhere in the Museum's vicinity... only nobody knows where.

The painting – the full title of which is *De español y castiza, español* – is by one of the finest Mexican painters of his day, Miguel Cabrera (circa 1715-1768). The painting is one in a series of sixteen “casta” paintings, a genre unique to New Spain, in which the artist represents all

the supposed mathematical racial possibilities resulting from the mixing of the Spanish, indigenous and African slave populations that were present in the New Spain of the time. The paintings all are of the $a + b = c$ type: you put a Spaniard and an Amerindian and you get a mestizo in the first generation. Put a mestizo together with another European, and you come up with a castizo. By

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John A. DeMarr, PI


today's standards the system is thoroughly offensive, but that wasn't a concern for the 18th Century painters whose job was to turn the system into art.

Casta paintings are series of sixteen canvases depicting sixteen of New Spain's algebraic racial possibilities. As a rule, each painting in the series depicted the parents and the child in typical socio-economic conditions. The surviving series of paintings don't agree as to which racial grades should be

included, but the concept remains the same. So does the political message.

Keeping sixteen paintings together through nearly four hundred years of turbulent history is impossible, so most casta series have ended up scattered to the four corners of the earth. The Cabrera series, possibly the finest in the genre, is virtually complete, and fourteen of the sixteen paintings were reunited for a 2006 show at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. The fifteenth was discovered rolled up under a couch in Northern California in 2015, and [was acquired by LACMA](#) with great fanfare. Part of the fanfare was a front-page story in the Los Angeles Times by Christopher Knight, which is what started the mystery of the sixteenth picture.

Shortly after LACMA's acquisition of *De español y morisca, albina* (I'll spare you the racial math), a bizarre letter was delivered to Ilona Katzew, the curator of Latin American art at the museum. The



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letter was written as though it were from the child in the missing painting, De español y castiza, español. (The racial math here makes it so that the child in the painting, with one-eighth indigenous blood, counts as fully Spanish.) Signed “Española”, the letter begins: “You should know that I am well and living less than two (2) miles from LACMA.” It goes on to say that, “if you ever gather a reunion of all my siblings, I would welcome the opportunity to be on display for a limited period of time.” The letter concludes: “I am not lost. I just do not wish to be found.”

Enclosed with the letter (which was typed except for the “signature”) were five photographs of parts of the painting, which led Katzew to assume that the painting was genuine.

That the possessor of the painting didn’t want it to be found was clear from the way the letter was sent. It had been mailed in a manila envelope, using a cut-off address label and out-of-date 37 and 25 cent stamps that weren’t even cancelled. The letter mentioned neither the identity of the owners, nor addresses, nor telephone numbers nor any other means of contacting the owners.

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In a city as densely packed as Los Angeles, a two-mile radius of LACMA covers terrain from Beverly Hills to Hancock Park and from West Hollywood to the Santa Monica Freeway. Even if it were legally possible, a door-to-door search of the area would be a logistical impossibility.

The Museum did what it could with what scant evidence they had to work with, including consulting the Samy’s Camera where the photographs had been printed. That produced no usable clue.

There is every reason to believe that the painting is out there, almost close enough to touch, but impossible to find. The lost (or not-so-lost) painting would fit perfectly into the “Painted in Mexico: 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici” show to open next month at LACMA, but that doesn’t look as though it will happen. Katzew did what she could to find the painting, but she had neither the time nor the clues to pursue a full-fledged investigation.

I am not aware whether LACMA contacted a private investigator or not, although [looking for lost objects](#) is certainly a service we perform in our profession. There are ways to unravel mysteries, even when they come with as few clues as this one. Perhaps we at [John A. DeMarr PI](#) wouldn’t have been able to find this particular needle in a mid-Wilshire haystack, but we would have welcomed the challenge. Just as there are real-life mysteries, so are there real-life private investigators to solve them.

If you’ve misplaced an art treasure – or if you’ve lost track of any object and wish to recover it – please contact our office at 877-423-6277 for a free consultation. We enjoy these kinds of cases, and have had a lot of success with them in the past.

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