



Creating the Cult of St. Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire

Charlene Villaseñor Black

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St. Joseph is mentioned only eight times in the New Testament Gospels. Prior to the late medieval period, Church doctrine rarely noticed him except in passing. But in 1555 this humble carpenter, earthly spouse of the Virgin Mary and foster father of Jesus, was made patron of the Conquest and conversion in Mexico. In 1672, King Charles II of Spain named St. Joseph patron of his kingdom, toppling St. James--traditional protector of the Iberian peninsula for over 800 years--from his honored position. Focusing on the changing manifestations of Holy Family and St. Joseph imagery in Spain and colonial Mexico from the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, this book examines the genesis of a new saint's cult after centuries of obscurity. In so doing, it elucidates the role of the visual arts in creating gender discourses and deploying them in conquest, conversion, and colonization.

Charlene Villaseñor Black examines numerous images and hundreds of primary sources in Spanish, Latin, Náhuatl, and Otomí. She finds that St. Joseph was not only the most frequently represented saint in Spanish Golden Age and Mexican colonial art, but also the most important. In Spain, St. Joseph was celebrated as a national icon and emblem of masculine authority in a society plagued by crisis and social disorder. In the Americas, the parental figure of the saint--model father, caring spouse, hardworking provider--became the perfect paradigm of Spanish colonial power.

Creating the Cult of St. Joseph exposes the complex interactions among artists, the Catholic Church and Inquisition, the Spanish monarchy, and colonial authorities. One of the only sustained studies of masculinity in early modern Spain, it also constitutes a rare comparative study of Spain and the Americas.

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