Charlene Villaseñor Black. *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph: Art and Gender in the Spanish Empire.*

While the widespread popularity of the cult of saints throughout the Catholic world has, through the centuries, ensured a constant production of images to
satisfy the needs of both devotees and Church ecclesiasts, art historians have hardly
granted a deserving scholarly interest to this fundamental aspect of Catholic reli-
gion and devotion. First, Protestantism projected the mistrust of the Roman
Church hierarchy into the celestial realm and denied any validity to earthly inter-
cessors. Later, the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution, with their long-lasting
positivistic effect, relegated saints and their cults to a form of folkloristic and
superstitious practice, now mostly observed in the southern part of Europe and the
developing world. In turn, devotional pictures of saints, often repetitive in nature,
have been easily neglected as retarda
taire, a derivative byproduct of high-art pro-
totypes. In her book Creating the Cult of St. Joseph, Villaseñor Black directly
confronts these issues and uses the very concepts of censorial practice and repeti-
tion as meaningful tools of analysis.

Saint Joseph enjoyed great popularity in the early modern Hispanic world. On
both sides of the Atlantic, the image of the foster father of Jesus came out of
centuries of obliteration, overshadowed by his much more famous and powerful
family members, to successfully become a social role model for both Spanish and
indigenous people. The book has a thematic organization that better serves the
purpose of highlighting the different facets of Saint Joseph’s cult. Each chapter is
self-contained yet linked to the preceding and following ones as in a series of
concentric circles. We start with a brief history of the saint’s fortune from the early
Middle Ages up to the period in question (1600s). The discussion then proceeds
from the private realm of Joseph’s life (his marriage to Mary, their family, and the
rearing of Jesus) to the social sphere of Joseph’s work. The book concludes with the
ultimate and spiritual moment that depicts his death. In the climax, the author
emphasizes the growing importance of the cult of Saint Joseph, leaving behind the
overpowering figures of the Virgin and Christ, to depict, at the end, a portrait of
the saint as the universal patron of Spain and its world dominions: a truly powerful
icon of the religious and political unity of the Spanish Empire. This latter part,
nevertheless, hardly fits the title and content of the chapter (“The Good Death”),
and might have been better treated in a separate concluding section.

All chapters share a similar organization that invites the reader to compare the
different themes, and draw conclusions about the interdependence of the private
and public sphere, and family and political values, in the rising patriarchal society
of the early modern period. Every chapter begins with an identification of the most
significant iconographic features of the theme treated. The author explicitly draws
on semiotics in order to distance herself from essentialist interpretations and move
toward a constructivist analysis. The reassessment of gender categories is the most
remarkable consequence of this approach: the author demonstrates the faultiness of
perceiving Hispanic culture as sexist, with texts and images depicting Joseph as a
forgiving husband to his mysteriously pregnant wife, and a nurturing father to his
foster son. Finally, the close scrutiny of visual evidence (unfortunately hindered by
tiny black-and-white illustrations) is complemented by contemporaneous hagi-
ographic and theological sources mostly concerned with the codification and control
of the saint’s cult. The Foucauldian approach of censorial sources, however, obliterates the role of pious beholders and countless charitable institutions that supported the cult for centuries. Her final remark, “St. Joseph’s figure today proves not only to be a malleable political signifier of institutional elite, but also an object of great popular devotion” (158), begs for equal treatment of both sides of the story.

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