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Review of Creating the Cult of St. Joseph

Frassani, A.

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

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. 272 pp. + 8 color pls. index. illus. bibl. \$60. ISBN: 0-691-09631-7.

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 religion and devotion. First, Protestantism projected the mistrust of the Roman Church hierarchy into the celestial realm and denied any validity to earthly intercessors. 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 *retardataire*, a derivative byproduct of high-art prototypes. In her book *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph*, Villaseñor Black directly confronts these issues and uses the very concepts of censorial practice and repetition 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 hagiographic 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.

ALESSIA FRASSANI

The Graduate Center of The City University of New York