Juliana and Josefa Sanromán: The Representation of Bourgeois Domesticity in Mexico, 1850-1860

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Description:

Translated by Christopher J. Follett
The Academia de San Carlos and the sexualization of genres

The hierarchical division of artistic genres undergirds the theoretical platform that sustained the academies of arts during the seventeenth century, surviving until the late nineteenth century, when the new vanguard movements definitively eroded its validity. For various reasons, however, the Academia de San Carlos did not immediately impose this division at the time of its foundation in 1781. It was only in the mid-nineteenth century that this concept began to dominate Mexican painting, partly as a result of the educational reorganization of the Academy which took place following the presidential decree signed by Antonio López de Santa Anna on October 2, 1843.

The reorganization decree was not an isolated initiative; it formed part of an ongoing national project that had been spearheaded by a group of intellectuals interested in improving conditions throughout the educational system; nevertheless, given the critical political and economic situation Mexico was suffering, it had not been possible to bring the project to fruition. It was the particular interest in the arts by a group of individuals connected to the Conservative party that finally carried it through; these were Honorato Riaño, Manuel Díez de Bonilla and, especially, Javier Echeverría, a wealthy man who enjoyed respect both as a politician and as an "honorable citizen," and who had twice been Finance Minster as well as interim President of the Republic. This group took the necessary steps to obtain government funding that would be secure and independent of the volatile political and economic environment, and that would enable the provisions set forth in Santa Anna's decree to be fulfilled. They achieved this by having the income from the National Lottery assigned as a source of support for the Academy, by means of a subsequent decree dated December 16, 1843. With the benefit of the Lottery income the project of reorganizing the Academia became a reality. [1]

Thus it was that in the 1850s one of the most unstable and dramatic decades that Mexico endured in the nineteenth century, when political positions were at their most polarized, and the fratricidal struggle between Conservatives and Liberals produced the greatest number of victims the Academia de San Carlos flourished, amid the violence of civil war, thanks to its economic and administrative autonomy. The Academy thus served as an example for both parties that, with a well-structured administration and adequate material resources, an institution could achieve the levels of productivity that everyone hoped for in other educational institutions.

The reorganization decree contemplated the hiring of European teachers, the reformation of the program of study, the establishment of competitions, prizes, and scholarships for use in Mexico and abroad, the installation and continued expansion of an art gallery with local and European works, and the purchase of the building that had been occupied by the Academy since the eighteenth century.

This period has been regarded by historians as one of the most fruitful in the Academy's history, [2] since all the provisions of the presidential decree came to be accomplished, although not necessarily in the ways originally...
contemplated. Along with the academic reforms, the practice of holding annual exhibitions began in which Mexican and foreign artists resident in the country, as well as private collectors, were invited to participate. In turn, these shows promoted the systematic production of art criticism in the press, [3] created an institutional space for the display of art, and helped build a public audience for painting and sculpture. [4]

Among the members of the Academy’s board of governors and its associated advisors were some of the wealthiest individuals in the capital, many of them descendants of the old viceregal aristocracy, along with outstanding literary figures of the Conservative party such as José Joaquín Pesado, Manuel Carpio, Javier Echeverría and Bernardo Couto. They were assisted by Pelegrín Clavé and Manuel Vilartwo Catalan professors whom the board of governors had hired in Rome, to direct painting and sculpture respectively and jointly they were responsible for the esthetic directives that prevailed in the Academy between 1848 and 1860.

Directed by the conservative intelligentsia, the Academy became a space in which the Conservatives united as a party after the tragic experience of the US invasion (1847-1848) which resulted in the loss of more than half of Mexico’s national territory put into effect a patriotic cultural project expressed in Biblical painting. This held sway until January 1861, when the military triumph of the Liberal party in the Reform War rendered it obsolete, and the lottery of San Carlos was suppressed by order of Benito Juárez.

The preponderance of themes from the Old Testament in the paintings of this period corresponded to the conservative ideological vision, which found its classic expression in the Nazarene esthetic represented by Clavé. This provided the ideological framework that permitted traditional historical discourse to reject or ignore paintings produced in other genres, particularly those with costumbrista subject matter. To give priority to history painting, whether of ancient or religious episodes, or mythological stories was the task of every fine arts academy and the Mexican one was no exception. It is well known that costumbrista or genre painting was not highly regarded by the directors of the institution. As Couto declared, in a biography of his associate, Manuel Carpio:

Carpio’s role in the Academy was always to maintain the severe principles of classical taste; in the tribunal of his judgment anything that was not strictly adjusted to those principles did not meet with his indulgence.

It was the same with him in the fine arts, of which he was also an aficionado, as in poetry. No painting, no statue, was worthy of his attention unless the subject was noble and executed with grandiosity and purity of style. The paintings that are known as de género or de costumbres, almost gave him an upset stomach; and if he had been the owner of Versailles, he would have said, like Louis XIV when he saw the graceful little works of Teniers: Get rid of those monstrosities. [5]

Nevertheless, the directors and the board of governors set about buying European works of this genre, particularly German and Italian, so that they could serve as models for the students. But during those years most of the paintings on costumbrista themes were not to be found in the production of Clavé’s students but in the galleries set aside for works sent in from outside the Academy, lent by private collectors, dealers and independent artists, Mexican or otherwise, for the purpose of enriching the annual exhibitions. In fact, the role of the Academy as a center for the exhibition and sale of art should be emphasized, since this enabled dealers to show their paintings and thus promote sales. Visitors to these exhibitions therefore had an opportunity to appreciate contemporary works and those of earlier periods, both Mexican and European.

Among the independent artists who exhibited canvases of a costumbrista nature at the Academy during the 1850s were the artists the critics referred to as señoritas pintoras (“lady painters”) along with others, including the Mexican Manuel Serrano, the Frenchman Édouard Pingret, and the Swiss Johann Salomon Hegi.
The señoritas pintoras

The historiography of art has been transformed and enriched in recent years by feminism and gender studies. At first, feminist art historians set about identifying and bringing to public knowledge female artists who had been passed over by the traditional discourses that emphasized such concepts as genius, originality, and consecrated masterpieces. They later formed a theory of their own that has taken over various concepts and categories of analysis from postmodernism, post-structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, and film studies, and has created a multidisciplinary theoretical platform from which a variety of feminist approaches in art history have emerged.

In contemporary Mexico, the phenomenon of the female painters came to light for the first time in an exhibition curated by Leonor Cortina for the Museo de San Carlos in Mexico City: Pintoras mexicanas del siglo XIX (Mexican Painters of the Nineteenth Century) ran from March to May of 1985. Through interviews conducted with descendants of the painters, Cortina produced an oral history of these families and thus managed to sketch the biographies of thirty of the "lady painters." It was surprising to find in that exhibition a considerable number of works that transcended the basic exercise of copying the works of their professors or recognized masterpieces of European art. In their portraits, interior scenes, landscapes and even bodegones or still-lifes, these women artists manifested an artistic identity of their own that revealed their social, gender and racial condition. Among them, an outstanding case is that of the sisters Juliana and Josefa Sanromán Castillo.

This article analyzes several works by the Sanromán sisters that engage the theme of domesticity, placing them in their social and cultural context, before the process of secularization and modernization that followed the Reform Laws and the triumph of the Liberal party led to the redefinition of the mid nineteenth-century discourses regarding bourgeois femininity, and before women were allowed entry as regular students at the Academy of San Carlos in 1888. It further aims to identify their models of creativity, to assess how they negotiated their condition as artists within their family and social networks, and to discover to what extent they confirmed, modified or transgressed the prevailing discourses on bourgeois femininity.

It should be mentioned that much of the information gathered by Leonor Cortina with the descendants of the painters has been confirmed by research in various archives. At the same time, it is to be hoped that a further and more exhaustive study of the social and family life of the Sanrománs and efforts to locate and catalogue their work will help us to deal in greater depth with their production in the context of Mexican art.

The Sanromán family settled in Mexico City around 1836; they were, however, originally from the provincial town of Santa María de los Lagos (Lagos de Moreno) in what is now the state of Jalisco. Blas and his wife María de Jesús had seven children: Refugio, Juliana, Genaro, Josefa, José Trinidad, Buenaventura and María de Jesús. The father was a shopkeeper and the family enjoyed a comfortable economic situation. It seems, nevertheless, that after arriving from the provinces the family was not particularly successful in joining the worldly circles in the capital. Their absence from the gazettes of the period is evident. Notwithstanding, their presence at the Academy of San Carlos is constant in the 1850s. Don Blas appears on the list of subscribers, with one share, from the second through to the eighth exhibition. The portraits that Pelegrín Clavé painted of Juliana, Josefa and Refugio Sanromán were exhibited in 1853, and critics busily commented on, and praised, the works that the sisters entered in particular exhibitions. Josefa also participated as a judge in a section with figures rendered in wax, clay or cloth, part of an exhibition of "flowers, shrubs, fruit, vegetables, sweets and wax, clay or cloth figures" organized by the Mexico City council in 1845; she shared this task with sculpture professor Manuel Vilari and other important social and cultural figures such as the Condes de la Cortina, Francisco de Fagoaga, María de las Mercedes Espada de Díez de Bonilla (wife of the secretary of the Academy), and another female painter, Guadalupe Carpio.

We do not know for sure how the Sanromán sisters began to paint. Cortina supposes that her teacher was Clavé,
based on the stylistic similarities the portraits executed by Josefa show with those of the Catalan painter, and on the copies she herself executed of his portraits her and her sisters. [11] If Clavé had indeed been Josefa's teacher, it is worth underlining the sexual and gender differentiation that the artist made between the esthetic references he promoted among his male students in the Academym the exaltation of history painting and Old Testament themes influenced by "Nazarenism" [12] and what he emphasized in private classes as a teacher of the " señoritas pintoras": the representation of interiors of domestic or religious houses, copies of landscapes and bodegones. This reveals a clear sexualization of artistic genres and the spaces in which they were practiced, and a differentiation between the training of professionals the students at the Academy and the instruction of amateurishs female pupils.

Assuming that Clavé was her teacher, it is also very likely that he would have encouraged the sisters to exhibit their works at the first exhibition held at the Academy in December 1848, although we do not know their titles, since no catalogue was published on that occasion. Josefa participated in the second exhibition with Interior del estudio de una artista (Studio Interior with an Artist), Frutero con flores (Fruitbowl with Flowers) and Cuadro de comedor (Still Life). Juliana also sent a painting titled Frutero con flores (Fruitbowl with Flowers), as well as Interior de un convento de dieguinos (Interior of a Monastery with Dieguino Friars).[13]

Interior del estudio de una artista (illus. 1) is one of the very few representations in the history of nineteenth-century Mexican art, and perhaps the first, to display the artistic activity of a woman painter. Josefa shows a woman standing in front of the easel in the center of the studio, caught in the act of painting and accompanied by another two women, one reading and the other observing the scene; it is very likely that the individuals depicted are Josefa herself and her sisters Juliana and María de Jesús. The studio, situated in the painter's house, forms part of the domestic space in which private life takes place, surrounded by family members. Her artistic activity, circumscribed within the domestic sphere, thus avoids transgressing the social mandates of female location and behavior that applied to her class. Her image as a painter, self-created, also reinforces the discursive construction of bourgeois femininity, as defined by the moralists of the period. At the same time it emphasizes one of the attributes considered essential to the moral constitution of women: religious fervor, as revealed in the works that hang from the studio walls: the portrait of Santa Teresa of Avila that the artist is actually painting, a Madonna and a copy, of Juliana's authorship, of the Dolorosa by Federico Madrazo (illus. 2); these show both her general interest in religious painting and her inclination towards Marian themes and the female characters of Christian hagiography. Through such images Josefa affirmed her condition, and that of her sisters, as devout Catholic women.

A lack of religious faith which, before the Reform War (1858-1861) could only be conceived in terms of Catholicism was unthinkable in a woman. In 1850 the writer of an article entitled "Consejos a las señoritas" ("Advice for Young Ladies") stated:

Nothing need be said regarding the importance of religion: this is so true that it is impossible to conceive of a perfect woman without an immense reserve of piety. If any were to lack religion she would be a monster. Fortunately in our republic such a thing is unknown: here the female sex is perfectly deserving of the title of "pious." [14]

The representation of flowers and still-life compositions was regarded as one of the most appropriate subjects for women, since they were easily accessible and executed and like other manual labors such as embroidery and flower-arrangingserved to decorate the home. The Sanromán sisters did not avoid this practice, as is shown by the works of this genre they executed and exhibited at the Academy. In the Interior del estudio de una artista, Josefa represented two such paintings flanking the copy of the Dolorosa (illus. 3); one of them has been identified as Jarrón con flores (illus. 4), painted by Juliana in 1848. With this, the artist not only stressed the thematic breadth of her production and that of her sister despite the constraints of female education but used the works of both as artistic indices of their creativity.

Since women were excluded from entry in the Academy until 1888 and were thus denied the formal study of anatomy...
and drawing, which constituted the foundation of an artistic education that saw its culmination in the historical genre, female painters could only gain such knowledge through the indications given them privately by their teachers or through the copies they made of their works. Juliana, for instance, almost certainly executed the canvas of San Rafael y Tobias (St. Raphael and Tobias) under the direction of Clavé. In the portrait Clavé painted of Juliana (Portrait of Juliana Sanromán illus. 5), she appears in the foreground in the interior of her studio. Her street dress, the fan she holds in her hand, and the gloves she is preparing to take off indicate that she has just arrived, while the black mantilla still placed on her head, reveals her recent attendance at church: having fulfilled her religious duties, Juliana is getting ready to paint. Clavé places her beside a box of paints, palette and brushes, and next to the canvas she was in the process of painting: San Rafael y Tobias. In contrast, in the Retrato de Josefa Sanromán (Portrait of Josefa Sanromán; illus. 6), Clavé omitted any reference to Josefa's artistic activity but, rather, stressed her social class, evident in the richness of her outfit, and religiosity, manifested in the mantilla that covers practically half of her body and the cross that hangs from her neck.

The presence of the religious paintings in Josefa's Interior del estudio de una artista and Clavé's Retrato de Juliana Sanromán reveal the sisters' ambition to make incursions through both copies and original compositions into the history genre, a field implicitly denied to women because of their educational marginalization. On the other hand, it is worth noting that of all the options offered by historical painting, the Sanromán sisters, especially Juliana, only seem to have been interested in that of a religious nature.

In 1850, at what was to be her last participation in the exhibitions of the Academy, Juliana presented the paintings Sala de música (Music Room) and Paisaje (Landscape), after having married, at the age of twenty-three, a merchant from Berlin named Carl Haghenbeck Braunwald in 1849. [15]

In Sala de música (illus. 7) as in Interior del estudio de una artista and other compositions by Josefa the scenario is the domestic space where, surrounded by family members, women engage in the activities recommended by the critics of the period as appropriated to their gender and class: painting, music and needlework. In Sala de música, Juliana recreated a luxurious, ordered and comfortable salon, surely a room in the house she inhabited with Haghenbeck, where a young woman is preparing to sing, accompanied by another who plays the piano while a man seated on an elegant sofa with a relaxed pose and wearing a sumptuous robe, enjoys the musical function that the women offer him while he smokes his pipe.

In nineteenth century culture, the ability to play the piano and sing in tune constituted a key element of female bourgeois education, linked to codes of social prestige that called for a demonstration of one's educated polish; nevertheless, Juliana preferred to construct the representation of her musical gifts in the privacy of a family reunion. Thus the painter underlined the demonstration of her own skills and abilities, but only in the strictest privacy of the home; only thus could she represent herself and her sister as the object of the masculine gaze, that of her husband.

Juliana's and Josefa's production includes portraits, domestic scenes, religious subjects, interiors of monasteries, copies of landscapes, and still-lifes. Their work, exhibited publicly in the galleries of the Academy of San Carlos, contributed to reinforcing the dominant discourse disseminated by the printing press at mid century regarding the bourgeois ideal of femininity.

The new bourgeois ideal of the woman

The concept of the role of women in the home, their tasks and their mission in society had been transformed radically since the demise of the Viceroyalty in favor a new social order based on the consolidation of the nuclear family and the sexual division of labor in the public and private spheres. According to the ideal marked out by medical, moral
and philosophical discourses that laid down the rules for feminine and bourgeois behavior, the proper place for women was the home, where they should serve as the guardians of moral and religious values (family, marriage, maternity, and the care of the children) on which the stability of society depended.

Around the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries the diffusion among the upper and middle classes of enlightened ideas regarding the family which accorded women a capital importance in their roles as mothers and wives, forgers of future citizens engaged men of thought and letters in an effort to transform the old customs of colonial society. Female idleness among the upper classes, the paternal choice of husbands, the inclination to frivolity and amusement and indifference regarding maternal care began to be disproved of by moralists. Hence the contrast between eighteenth and nineteenth-century ideas of what constituted an upper-class female education: in the nineteenth century the aim was to raise the educational level of women so that they could respond to the new demands that were being made on them. Music, painting, singing, needlework and other manual labors that could be practiced in the home were considered ideal pursuits for women. The idleness that had characterized those of the previous century began to be censured, as is explained in the article "Consejos a las señoritas", published in the *Presente amistoso dedicado a las señoritas mexicanas*, published by Ignacio Cumplido in 1851, and which must have been known to the Sanromán sisters:

In Mexico there was a time when, thanks to our subjugators, the woman who in her home did nothing was regarded as singularly happy, she who passed the days and the years in inaction and tedium, in which women would often say *I am a lady ; therefore I do nothing and know nothing*. Since our independence, education and customs have changed notably, and the fair sex, whose dignity and importance have henceforth been held in high esteem, is occupied in occupations both useful and pleasing dedicated to domestic tasks, directing the order and occupations of the family with sound judgment, entertained with music, with embroidery and the cultivation of flowers, studying languages, devoted to profitable and pleasant readings and thus brings delight to society with its company and conversation.

The construction and propagation of the new feminine ideal was nourished to a considerable extent by the abundant number of publications that in the form of illustrated magazines, manuals and calendars saw the light during the first half of the century. Written by mensometimes under female pseudonyms in order to strengthen their powers of persuasion the articles in these publications disseminated the patterns of behavior that women ought to follow, accompanied by useful recommendations for resolving domestic problems, instructions for carrying out manual labors, embroidery patterns, painting lessons, edifying biographies and even articles on history, geography and botany. Their purpose was to entertain, amuse and educate the "fair sex."

Nonetheless, some moralists warned of the dangers of falling into the opposite extreme: the absolute dedication of women to the cultivation of such activities could convert them into *bachilleras* and make them forget their cardinal duty: maternity and the care of the home. In this respect a moralist wrote in 1853:

A young woman may very well speak French and Italian, [...] play like a professional and sing like a siren; have her bedroom adorned with drawings, paintings and flowers all made by her own hands: she may likewise dance like Sempronia herself, and yet we believe that she may prove to be very ill educated [...].

Although being of high birth authorizes a young woman to learn the established arts, permit me to wonder: is it really the true purpose of women of rank to be dancers, singer-actresses, musicians, painters, engravers, and embroiderers? [...]

The profession of ladies on which their instruction must be centered is that of daughters, wives, mother and directors of families [...]. When a sensible man decides to marry, he requires a companion, not an artist [...].
As can be surmised from this passage, efforts to educate the female sectors had borne fruit by mid-century. Women, besides carrying out the traditional manual labors, received classes in music, singing, and painting and, in some publications, they were encouraged to make incursions into writing. But for some, the enthusiasm of women for learning and the arts was seen as a danger that put social stability at risk and could even lead to a transgression of the traditional roles of the sexes. The message of these men was clear: women should not forget or confuse the natural role for which they had been created with whatever literary or artistic inclinations they might happen to have. On this point the Spanish writer Niceto de Zamacois wrote in 1852:

There are few women who, properly, receive a literary education because having been born with the obligation to busy themselves with domestic matters such an education would be prejudicial to society as a whole, lest women, out of the desire to publish their ideas, were to neglect the upbringing of their children and the interior arrangements of the home.

To leave the sphere in which God has wisely situated his creatures is to rebel against order and against nature [...].

A woman loses nothing by not writing for the public; the contrary rather: society regards with greater appreciation a woman who confesses frankly that she has studied no more than how to govern her home, and with less one who shows pride in her knowledge and wishes to reform the world [...].

It is good that women who have instruction and talent should write; but they should do it from time to time and as a mere pastime, and not with the aim of making a show of their enlightenment, devoting themselves exclusively to that while neglecting their domestic tasks [...].

Many are the women who write, few those who deserve the name of writers [...].

In women whether educated or unlearned to speak and write little is a recommended virtue. [20]

If at first sight, and for the present-day spectator, the works of the Sanromán sisters seem to reproduce the most traditional values, when seen in the context of their time they constitute a different image of Mexican womanhood (compared to their forebears in the viceregal era, particularly those of the eighteenth century, and to their own class of course). [21] And this is not only because they possessed a power of representation, and a creative faculty, traditionally adjudicated to the male sector, as well as being active producers of their own images. On the margins of the capital's artistic circles they found a way to negotiate, from the starting point of their sexual condition and with the advantages their social condition gave them. In their paintings they conceived of themselves and examined themselves as actors and protagonists of their own work, something quite unusual in the Mexican context.

**Images for constructing bourgeoisie domesticity**

In *Gabinete de costura* (Sewing Room; illus. 8), shown at the Academy in 1855, Josefa represented a luxuriously decorated interior. The profusion of paintings on the walls, the richness of the furniture and the presence of sumptuous objects such as the curtaining, the chandelier, the sculptures, and the mirror give splendor to the domestic precinct in which a pair of diligent women, one young and the other elderly, take advantage of the morning light that filters through a window to do their needlework (illus. 9), while a little girl reclined on the sofa entertains two smaller children with some toys. In the background a servant leaves the room with a tray in hand.

In the painting, the figures share the same space, but their activities set them apart. Josefa has divided them into
three groups characterized by distinct roles that point to social differentiation within the same home. The women beside the window, engrossed in their work, form a closed nucleus indifferent to the children and the maid. Each group develops activities differentiated by their ages and their social condition.

The representation of the artist as engaged in a domestic activity such as sewing, sets her within the social parameters of highest esteem. In the nineteenth century needlework was considered a sign of high prestige in family and social networks. Josefa sees herself as a diligent woman and it is through this image represented in her painting that she wishes to be seen by the external viewer.

In this, as in other compositions, Josefa has also used as models her close relatives and other participants in the intimacy of the home, such as the servant who appears in the background of the picture who can also be seen in La convalecencia (Convalescence) of 1854. Maids who worked in wealthy middle-class homes were burdened with the “invisible labor” during long and wearisome working days, which afforded their mistresses free time to busy themselves with educational or other activities and to oversee the order and the cleanliness of the homeboth highly esteemed bourgeois values. The women artists were able to paint thanks to those who performed these required domestic chores. In Gabinete de costura and La convalecencia (illus. 10), it is significant that Josefa has situated them in the background of the composition, mute and anonymous witnesses to the family scenes. Their dress, demeanor, the activities they perform and the place they occupy in the picture testify to their position in the family hierarchy. Employed for domestic service, the daily life of the servants unfolds in a space to which they do not belong, since membership was barred to them by social position and cultural practice (illus. 11). Hence, the daily life together of maids and mistresses was regulated by class differences and also, for the most part, differences of race. Tensions must have been widespread and frequent.

The working women represented by Josefa express a reserved and humble attitude. Clean and desexualized, their presence is neither subversive nor disturbing to domestic rituals. These images are quite unlike masculine representations of women of the lower classes, situated in kitchens or in public places; there, they are generally objects of curiosity and/or of male sexual desire, with its consequent representative strategies. Lower-class womenmaids, cooks, nannies, market vendors, and itinerant street sellers were a recurrent motif in the costumbrista paintings of the nineteenth century executed by Mexican artists such as José Agustín Arrieta and Manuel Serrano, or foreigners like Pingret and Hegi. In these, eroticism, flirtation and seduction form part of the visual construction of the femininity of lower-class women who ignore bourgeois codes of behavior and morality.

Serrano's Truhanes en una venta (Rogues at an Inn; illus. 12) can be regarded as a paradigmatic image in this sense. Beside a humble construction in the countryside two roguish types are playing cards and staking money at a table surrounded by five onlookers, four men and a woman. One of the players rests his face in his hand in a sign of chagrin at his bad luck in the game, while the other arm takes his female companion by the waist. Serrano has depicted the latter with all the erotic attributes of lower-class women constructed by the writers and painters of the mid century: the full bosom, the slender waist, the broad hips and the visible dainty feet, as well as the rebozo and the red skirt, that enables her to be identified as a "china." Inconceivable in the pictorial representations of women of the bourgeoisie, the corporal relation between the chinaco and the china gives the image an erotic tone, typical of such scenes, which is generally accompanied by other symbolic elements: among those included by Serrano are cards, coins, bottles and lances with red pennants at the right edge of the painting, indicating the game, the stakes, the drunkenness and the men's association with the guerilla bands that fought on the liberal side during the Reform War. Thus, the eroticism of the female figure, as a referent of sexual pleasures, helps to complement the promiscuous ambience of the painting, the public sphere, as opposed to the "spaces of femininity" represented in the works of the Sanromán sisters and consigned to bourgeois women. [22]

In La convalecencia (illus. 10), presented at the Academy in the 1854-1855 exhibition, [23] Josefa availed herself of the same compositional solution used by her in Gabinete de costura and by Juliana in Sala de música. The paintings are constructed on the basis of a cube, in which there is a harmonious integration between the architectural space,
It is probable that La convalecencia alludes to the sickness of Juliana that was finally to lead to her death. In an ornamented bourgeois salon, a young woman with a pale face and a slender body is helped by a woman to sit down in an upholstered armchair while she extends her hand for the doctor to take her pulse. At the far right of the canvas a girl with a doll, very possibly one of her nieces, contemplates the scene, distant and as if surprised. In the background, a double door is open to reveal the bedroom in which a maid is preparing the bed. In this painting Josefa has drawn on a painful event in the family and transcends it through her artistic representation. La convalecencia might be compared to an exvoto, a veiled plea for recovery of health in which sisterly love is evident in the attentive care given her during an illness.

The paintings Dolorosa and San Rafael y Tobías, hanging from the walls of the salon and executed by Juliana (illus. 13), seem to constitute a kind of visual commemoration of the dead sister. It was not only here that Josefa rendered homage to the artistic ability of her older sister; she also did so by making copies of Juliana's still-lifes, of her Sala de Música, and of the portrait that Clavé had painted in her studio. Josefa's identification with her older sister, expressed in this painting and the copies she made of her work, transcended the boundaries of artistic activity that the two had shared, when she married her deceased sister's husband. Juliana having died without children in October 1852, her sister Josefa married Carl Haghenbeck, her widowed brother-in-law, in the church of Loreto on August 23, 1856 at the age of twenty-seven. [26]

Marriage vs. artistic activity

It is possible that Haghenbeck did not share the artistic enthusiasm of the Sanromán family, or at least not for public exhibition since, after her marriage, Josefa, like her sister before her, ceased presenting her works at the Academy's annual exhibitions, although it seems that she did not definitively renounce painting, as is shown by the portrait she made of her daughter María de Jesús, which is dated 1863. [27]

Thus, after being considered by the critics one of the best Mexican painters, Josefa ended up shut away in her home to attend to her maternal and domestic duties. [28] The paintings she executed after her marriage, taking members of her family as models, remained restricted to family viewers. The portraits of her husband or her children were not publicly shown. The name of her husband, however, did appear on the list of subscribers for 1850, 1851, 1852 (the years he was married to Juliana), and again, following his marriage to Josefa, for the years 1856, 1858 and 1862. [29]

The lamentable case of Josefa was no exception. Most of the “señoritas pintoras,” after getting married, stopped publically exhibiting their paintings at the Academythe only place that offered them that possibilityor worse still, laid down their brushes for ever. In this context it would seem that the urgings of the more rigorous spokesmen for the safeguarding of bourgeois morality had made themselves heard.

Hence Josefa's work remained restricted to the private sphere, like that of most of the female painters of the nineteenth century. This was also the case of the Autorretrato con su familia (Self-Portrait with Her Family; illus. 14) by Guadalupe Carpio de Mayora, daughter of the poet and physician Manuel Carpio who, apart from his work as a professor of anatomy, was a member of the board of governors and secretary of the Academy of San Carlos.

 Posted on a chair, looking straight at the viewer, and with palette and brush in her hands, the painter depicts herself in front of the easel at the moment of painting the portrait of Martín Mayora, her husband, accompanied by his mother.
and their children, forming a kind of painting within a painting, since the portrait she was executing actually exists (illus. 15). The author's compositional conception becomes an eloquent manifestation not only of the artistic practice framed within the domestic environment, before the view of members of her family and interspersed with her maternal duties, but also of the division of spheres and family relations, with the patriarchal figure represented by an image. While the painter-mother forms with her children and her own mother a circular and closed group in which the closeness and the physical contact between the individuals depicted is implicit, the image of the father is merely present, symbolically, by means of the portrait the wife is painting. The absence of the paternal figure in the domestic scenes was frequent in paintings, as well as his symbolic representation by means of the presence of objects that implicitly referred to him with the aim of legitimating maternity. [30] In the painting by Guadalupe Carpio, family members become the only spectators of artistic creation. The work was never shown in the Academy's galleries.

The señoritas pintoras and art criticism

If it had not been for the Academy, the paintings of these female artists would have remained entirely beyond the public domain, and beyond the view of art critics, who granted their approval. The critics praised the felicity of their work, permitted themselves to make suggestions, and lamented their absence when the women were unable to be present at the exhibition of their paintings. Nonetheless, it must be pointed out that the female condition of the painters (and this was also the case with women writers) led the critics to adopt a benevolent attitude. Their judgments were permeated with a sexual and class differentiation. As representatives of the upper and most cultivated spheres of society, these artists were dealt with in separate sections and always on the basis of their condition as amateurs. Terms such as adornment, polish and sparkle were frequent in their reviews of the women's paintings in the Academy's galleries, and adjectives such as enchanting, beautiful or lovely were used to describe the creators themselves; such terms were, of course, never used in their criticism of the male artists. "The fair lady painters of our capital city would have us spellbound, to the point of rendering us unable to continue in our task, if we were to complement them as is their worth, on their artistic triumphs. They are the laurel crown of our society, the pride of their families, and the glory of their fatherland, for their beauty, their application and their excellence." [31]

This gender differentiation also conditioned critical appreciation regarding the types of subject they attempted. The critics considered that the painting of costumbres (daily life) was the most appropriate for treatment by women:

Among the persons of the fair sex who have adorned the gallery of paintings this year with highly appreciable works, the names of the Misses Cervantes, Sanromán [etc.] figure. Many of these enchanting ladies not content to limit themselves to the narrow and restricted circle of the copy, have made the leap into the vast field of composition, now executing portraits of their kinfolk, now reproducing views of pleasant landscapes, and then again representing the enchantment of domestic scenes, a subject that persons of the fair sex must understand better than anybody, since it is almost entirely in the sweet retirement of home and family that the tranquil existence of our beauties slips by. [32]

A reading of the texts on the work of female painters shows a flattering balance as regards their acceptance by the guild of critics. But this courtesy on the part of the male critics only seems to confirm the secondary and subordinate condition of their production, in the same way that they genres they worked (costumbrista and landscape painting, or paintings of flowers and bodegones), was equally consigned to a marginal position in comparison to the historical genre. Underestimated by the directors of the Academy and classified as a minor genre that, nevertheless, must inevitably form part of the thematic repertoire, costumbrista and still-life painting was situated on the margins of academic production in the same way as the female painters who produced it. Like the works of other artists independent of the Academy, the women's paintings did not enter the competitions, which were reserved exclusively for the institution's students. Even so, the works of male artists were susceptible to comparison among themselves; this was not the case of the women painters, always judged in isolation.
At least until the end of the nineteenth century, women who painted only did so as part of the domestic activities assigned to their sex and class. They did not sell any of their works, surely because they never attempted to do so. Earning money by painting would have implied a transgression of social mores and the economic and family structure on which the Mexican bourgeoisie of the period rested. On the contrary, artistic activity for men constituted a means for obtaining the economic remuneration and social prestige that place them among the productive sectors of society. From the point of view of the constructors and spectators of bourgeois culture, painting was, for women, one more *ornament* that added capital to their image in the fabric of social relations. For the Sanromán sisters, however, as for the rest of the female artists of their generation, despite the limitations they suffered regarding their access to formal education and professional life, artistic activity constituted for them the possession of a medium of expression, which until then the women of their class had not enjoyed, and gave them the possibility of discovering, recognizing and acquiring awareness of their own capacities.

By the close of the nineteenth century the situation for women with artistic aspirations had changed; around 1888, the Academy's archives record the first names of women enrolled as regular students, but once again the sex difference in education made itself felt: their aspirations could go no further than landscapes, the only course of studies open to them. This fact did, however, mean that artistic training ceased to be a privilege reserved to women of the upper classes, and was now also a possibility for those of the middle and lower classes. The formal and institutional artistic education they acquired afforded some of them a means of support as teachers of drawing and even enabled a few of them to become professional artists. [33]

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[4] In the period addressed here, eleven exhibitions were held, the first in 1848 and the last in 1858; they were all open to the public from the last week of December to the last week of January. Entry in the first and last weeks was restricted to "subscribers", who by the purchase of one or more shares gained this and other privileges, such as being allowed to participate in the raffle of art-works at the close of the exhibition, to receive an engraving or a lithograph and the catalogue of the exhibited works, as well as the inclusion of their names in the catalogue under the title of "protectors of the fine arts." In the intermediate weeks entry was free of charge and open to all. See ROMERO DE TERREROS, 1963.


[6] This is actually quite a small number, since catalogues of the exhibitions held at the Academy between 1849 and 1899 register the participation of around 200 women. See ROMERO DE TERREROS, 1963.

[7] As stated by María de Jesús Castillo y González de Sanromán in a will drawn up in 1853 before the notary Francisco Villalón; the document omits mention of Juliana, since she had died in 1852. Archivo Histórico del Archivo General de Notarias del Distrito Federal, book 4872, folios 258-261.


[9] The portraits of the three Sanromán sisters were presented in the sixth exhibition of the Academy in the 1853-1854 season (ibid., p. 170).

Carl Haghenbeck Braunwald arrived in Mexico in 1844 at the age of twenty-seven. With a loan from another German merchant he acquired the clothing and haberdashery stores "La Luz del Día" and "La Mina de Oro." The dowry he received from Juliana's father, Blas Sanromán, helped him to repay the loan. From 1857, however, he rented out his commercial business to devote himself exclusively to banking, effecting significant loans on real estate (among his debtors, for example, were the premises of J. B. Jecker y Cía.) and the outright purchase of property, enabling him to amass a substantial fortune (see VON METZ, 1982 : pp. 107 and 474-476).

One of the first enlightened Mexicans to censure the customs of New Spain as regards the education of women was José Joaquín Fernández de Lizardi, in his abundant output and particularly in his didactic and moralistic novel, La Quijotita y su prima, published in its first version in 1818 and 1819 and in its completed version in 1832.

They include the following : El Semanario de las Señoritas Mexicanas ; La Semana de las Señoritas ; La Ilustración. Semanario de las Señoritas ; La Camelia. Semanario de Literatura, Variedades, Teatros, Modas, etc. Dedicado a las Señoritas Mexicanas ; Presente Amistoso Dedicado a las Señoritas Mexicanas ; and Calendario del Bello Secso.

"Deberes de la mujer," in La Camelia. Semanario de Literatura, Variedades, Teatros, Modas, etc. Dedicado a las Señoritas Mejicanas, 1853.

They include the following : El Semanario de las Señoritas Mexicanas ; La Semana de las Señoritas ; La Ilustración. Semanario de las Señoritas ; La Camelia. Semanario de Literatura, Variedades, Teatros, Modas, etc. Dedicado a las Señoritas Mexicanas ; Presente Amistoso Dedicado a las Señoritas Mexicanas ; and Calendario del Bello Secso.

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I borrow the expression "spaces of femininity" from Griselda Pollock who uses it to analyze the construction of discourses on modernity and the sexual differentiation of spaces in the public and private spheres. See POLLOCK, 1988.

The debt of these compositions to seventeenth-century Dutch interior scenes is clear ; nonetheless, I have not been able to identify precise sources that the Sanromán sisters might have seen, nor the models that Clavé could have shown them.

Archivo del Ayuntamiento de la Ciudad de México, "Libro de defunciones del Panteón de San Fernando," inventory no. 4750, folio 84.


Josefa had five children with Carl Haghenbeck : Catalina and Josefa, who died in infancy, and María de Jesús, Carlos and Agustín. This is mentioned by Hahenbeck in a will drawn up on April 22, 1874 before the notary Fermín González Cosío. Archivo Histórico del Archivo General de Notarías de la Ciudad de México, book 1863, folios 479v-481v.

Although Josefa retired publicly from painting after her marriage in order to devote herself to the care of her children and the family home, she also served as an important collaborator in her husband's businesses. On the occasion of his traveling in 1875, Josefa effected, in his name, numerous transactions involving mortgages. Archivo Histórico del Archivo General de Notarías de la Ciudad de México, book 1864, folios 38-38v and book 1865, folios 344-347, 400-403, 414v-417 and 493v-496v.

ROMERO DE TERREROS, 1963 : pp. 93, 121, 147, 260, 318 and 347.


Ibid., p. 397.