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*Araştırma Makalesi*

## REFLECTION OF SOCIAL STRATIFICATION IN ART: THE CASE OF CASTA PAINTINGS

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### *Abstract*<sup>1</sup>

*Visual culture products are not neutral objects. It can be argued that visual culture products are indicative of power relations, and that these relations are more pronounced during periods of social change and upheaval. Understanding visual cultural products beyond the confines of their frames, evaluating these images within contexts, and looking beyond the images are necessary both to conduct a profound analysis of artistic production and to reveal the dynamics of social power relations. Throughout mainstream art history, it is evident that people of colour have been represented with stereotyped identities distinct from those of whites. Western visual regimes reproduce existing inequalities and stratifications in society through racialized images. Casta paintings crystallize this perspective, depicting the process of racial mixing among the three main groups living in Mexico, which was part of the Spanish colony in the 18th century. Casta paintings narrate the ways in which a racialized society is expressed in visual culture. This study focuses on the exhibition *Casta: The Origins of Caste* to examine how social stratification and race are visualized in works of art.*

**Keywords:** *Social Stratification, Visual Representation, Racism, Casta Painting, Casta: The Origins of Caste.*

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## TOPLUMSAL TABAKALAŞMANIN SANATA YANSIMASI: CASTA RESİMLERİ ÖRNEĞİ

### Öz

Görsel kültür ürünlerini nötr nesnelere değildir. Görsel kültür ürünlerinin güç ilişkilerinin bir göstergesi olduğu ve bu ilişkilerin toplumsal değişim ve kırılma dönemlerinde daha belirgin hale geldiği söylenebilir. Görsel kültür ürünlerini içinde bulunduğu çerçeveye ile sınırlı tutmadan anlamaya çalışmak, bu görüntüleri bağlamlarla değerlendirmek, görüntülerin ötesine bakmak hem sanatsal üretimin derinlikli analizini yapmak hem de toplumsal güç ilişkilerinin dinamiklerini ortaya çıkarmak için gereklidir. Ana akım sanat tarihinin her döneminde beyaz olmayanların beyazlardan farklı olarak klişeleştirilmiş kimliklerle temsil edildiği görülür. Batılı görsel rejimler ırksallaştırılmış görüntüler aracılığıyla toplumda var olan eşitsizlikleri ve tabakalaşmayı yeniden üretirler. Casta resimleri bu bakış açısının kristalize olduğu bir resim türüdür. 18. yüzyılda İspanyol kolonisine dahil olan Meksika'da yaşayan üç ana grup arasındaki ırk karışım sürecini tasvir eden Casta resimleri, ırksallaştırılmış bir toplumun görsel kültürde ifade edilme biçimlerini anlatır. Bu çalışma Casta: The Origins of Caste sergisine odaklanarak toplumsal tabakalaşma ve ırkın sanat eserlerinde nasıl görselleştirildiğini incelemektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Toplumsal Tabakalaşma, Görsel Temsil, Irkçılık, Casta Resimleri, Casta: The Origins of Caste.

### INTRODUCTION

All images encountered in daily life, whether aesthetic or ordinary, are products of visual culture. Visual culture studies, which focuses on the relationships between images, the individual and society, is an area of research that is addressed by different disciplines in different contexts. Art sociology and visual anthropology, for example, often use art and visual culture products as a source of data to understand historical, political, technological, and economic transformations. Based on the assumption that images are directly related to ideological, political, and social issues, this study will examine Casta paintings that reflect racialised social stratification practices. In analysing Casta paintings, the theoretical basis within the sociology of art and visual anthropology are the approaches that deal with the art product in terms of social relations. In this context, the sociology of art enables the examination of the interconnections between art products and ethnic, racial and class dynamics through intersectional methodologies, with the objective of analysing images in accordance with these relationships. As Howard S. Becker (2003, p. 85) states, “a distinguished sociological tradition holds that art is social in character, this being a specific instance of the more general proposition that knowledge and cultural products are social in character or have a social base.” From this perspective, many other factors are overlooked when works of art are evaluated only in terms of their current and technical characteristics and when they are considered as neutral objects. Emotions arising from the interaction with the work, the personal history of the artist,

and the material conditions that led to the creation of the work, as well as the period and the technical, socio-economic, political, and cultural conditions of that period, can enable an in-depth analysis of the work. The sociological approach to understanding art raises a multitude of questions pertaining to the social construction of art. These questions include: “Is there any connection between aesthetics and the structure of society?”, “does art develop on its own terms, or is it shaped by social and historical factors?”, “how can a work of art be interpreted?”, “do we all have the same taste in art?”

Some approaches suggest, art is considered to be sublime and inaccessible. These approaches suggest that only those who have developed cultural capital and are considered to have an appreciation of art can interpret a work of fine art (Bennett, 2009; Bourdieu, 2015; Heinich, 2013, p. 136; Vihalem, 2018, p. 7). However, the validity of this dichotomy has been debated by various academic circles in recent years. When artworks are defined as objects belonging to the world of interconnected social structures as well as the emotions they evoke in individuals, they will be open to a reading with multiple meanings. The fields of cultural theory and visual anthropology have also examined the intricate relationships between cultural artefacts and the diverse manifestations of power, privilege, racism and discrimination (Young, 2003, p. 209). As Evans and Hall (2007, p. 4) pointed out, “‘visuality’ refers to the visual register in which the image and visual meaning operate.” In other words, while analysing the codes of visual culture products, it can be stated that, in addition to the technical functioning of the eye, the perspective of the artist and the audience, and the historical and sociological context, are also significant factors in the interpretation of the visual text. The study by Hooks (1992) is noteworthy for its approach to cultural products as an anthropological subject. Hooks addresses the issue of racism in visual culture products by examining its historical development from the 19th century to the present. She asserts that visual representations, ranging from painting to photography, often portray black women in an unrealistic manner. These representations frequently depict black women as either “wild and sexy” or in a state of “pure obedience”.

Based on all these theoretical approaches for instance, if one were to evaluate the *Casta* paintings discussed in this article solely based on technical aspects such as genre, colour, texture, light, material, and size, one would overlook the stereotypes depicted in these paintings as well as the social structure of the period and geography in which they were created. *Casta* paintings are visual documents that quite clearly depict social stratification and racial distinctions and have features that can be used to collect data about the colonial practices of the period and the visual representations of these practices. In consequence, this study will focus on the *Casta: The Origins of Caste* exhibition and analyse the social stratification and racist codes in *Casta* paintings.

## **CASTA PAINTINGS AND RACIAL CLASSIFICATION**

Cultural practices are among the areas where racialized and social class-based distinctions and social inequalities are clearly observed. Cultural and artistic products are an important source of data for tracing examples of historically stereotypical colonialist representations. Casta paintings, one of the clearest examples of the colonial gaze, depicts scenes of miscegenation. These paintings depict the construction of a racial identity that is considered appropriate to the new order in a society whose land and identity have been colonised. As Olivier Barlet (2000, p. 39) states, “colonialism has been a dispossession of space, deprivation of identity.” An important part of the destruction of identity is creating unreal, imaginary images and stereotypes. This hierarchical perspective is reinforced in Casta paintings with dichotomies such as civilised / barbarian, modern / primitive.

The genre of Casta paintings developed over a century, “the number of known casta sets exceeds one hundred, and continues to grow as paintings appear on the market” (Katzew, 2004, p. 63, 94). Although many artists painted Casta paintings during this period, Juan Rodríguez Juárez (first painter commissioned to develop a Casta series), José de Ibarra, Miguel Cabrera, José Paez, and Andrés de Islas were pioneers in the development of this genre. The paintings on display depict social change and colonial prejudices of the period. It is worth noting that all the artists responsible for creating these paintings were non-Spanish or non-white (Deans-Smith, 2005, From the texts in the exhibition, 2023).

Casta paintings, most of which originated in Mexico in the eighteenth century, are visual expressions of racial hierarchy. The paintings are based on the ideology of *limpieza de sangre* (purity of blood). This ideology classifies people of mixed race within the social system based on the percentage of “Spanish” or “Indian” blood, determined by the colour of their skin (Loren, 2007, p. 23). The explanations on the pictures show how to achieve the supposedly superior race, the Spanish or white race, through the model of racial mixing. The Casta paintings, which show the hierarchy in the social structure through visual representations, consist of a series of paintings. These paintings show the process of the mixing of the races of the three main groups that lived in the Spanish colony of Mexico in the 18th century. It is at this point that one can ask the question of who the Casta paintings were made for. That is according to Loren (2007, p. 24), “during the 18th century, more than 500 Casta paintings were produced, primarily by mixed blood artists such as Miguel Cabrera and Jose de Paez, for a primarily elite audience in Spain.”

Casta paintings show the mixing of races and social hierarchy in a schematic order. In the family depictions in the paintings, the racial characteristics of the mother, father and child/children are clearly shown through clothing, food, drink, and accessories in addition to skin colour (Katzew, 2004, p. 65, 106, 109, 189). Furthermore, the skin colours that emerge because of the hybridisation of people of different racial origins and the social group to which different colours correspond are emphasised with the pretence of scientificity. The appearance of the new races

that emerge because of the mixing of European races and non-European races is described step by step in these pictures.

The Casta paintings are arranged in a certain order, with numbers and texts. These numbers or descriptions create a racial taxonomy, which is a pseudoscientific categorisation. As Albert Memmi (1999, p. 183), like many other scholars, clearly states, “(...) racism is not a scientific theory, but rather a collection of opinions that are, in and of themselves, quite incoherent.” Nonetheless, the genre of the Casta was based on a racialised visual classification with a claim to scientificity built on a taxonomy. According to taxonomy, a main method of the Enlightenment, these paintings asserted that individuals could be scientifically categorised based on their racial composition and physical appearance. Taxonomy was also a way of satisfying the desire to showcase an exoticised region and its inhabitants. These paintings were considered a form of documentation, providing Europeans with information about faraway lands. Thus, the representations presented in the paintings are placed in their place according to the Western-centred hierarchical world system pyramid. During this period, scientific methods attempted to categorise and explain both the human and non-human world. The “scientific” approaches that laid the groundwork for this perspective were the anthropological and ethnographic studies that emerged during the early Enlightenment.

These approaches positioned the Western white male at the top of the hierarchy and purported to explain societies and cultures through a pyramidal world system. During this period, taxonomy was a method often used in cultural and scientific studies to prove the superiority of Western-centred, white, and male. As Rebecca Earle (2016, p. 431) emphasises, the proximity between the colonial language reflected in the paintings and scientific classification is not a coincidence: “The classifications that underpinned early modern systems of knowledge in the Atlantic world embraced both plants and people and reflected a yearning for order that transcended any division between science and statecraft.” As seen in the Casta paintings social groups that needed to be kept under political control were subjected to the classification system of natural sciences too.

The unrealistic depiction of the family also appears as an important unifying element in the classification of the different racial groups in society and as a metaphorical image of the continuity of society. In other words, Casta paintings are notable for their use of heteronormative family imagery, which serves to reinforce social hierarchy. As Katzew (2004, p. 202) points out, “the use of the familial metaphor in Casta painting is a powerful way of suggesting the possibility of permanent control, especially at a time when insubordination and revolts had become an ever-present threat to colonial rule.” In the *Casta: The Origins of Caste* exhibition, the families in the fiction of an imaginary community are reflected in the desire to be together, albeit within a racial hierarchy.

## CASTA: THE ORIGINS OF CASTE

Curated by Tara Munroe of Opal22 Arts and Edutainment and organised in partnership Leicester Museum and Art Gallery and funded by National Heritage Lottery Fund, *Casta: The Origins of Caste* was an exhibition that examines racism based on social stratification in relation to art and society. Munroe, the founder of Opal22 Arts and Edutainment, curated an exhibition that excels in both form and content. As stated in the texts in the exhibition (2023), Opal22 positions itself as more than an arts organisation: “At Opal22 Arts and Edutainment, we are more than just an arts and heritage organisation - we are storytellers, creators, and custodians of the past, present, and future.” This definition directly affected the exhibition narrative, exhibition practices and curatorial policies. The curatorial choices emphasised the intersection of socio-political issues and art. This makes *Casta: The Origins of Caste* a timeless exhibition to be discussed even after it ends. This multifaceted exhibition can be considered as a kind of social history narrative. The statement “a painting says a thousand words, but who controls the narrative?” above the door at the entrance of the exhibition invited audiences to engage with social history.

Curator Munroe describes *Casta: The Origins of Caste* exhibition as a journey. More than 10 years in the making, the first step in this journey was an encounter by chance with the paintings in 2010 when Munroe was a trainee curator at Leicester Museums and Galleries. She says that all five of these paintings were damaged in some way. In the following process, these five paintings were restored and presented to the audiences. Although the starting point of the exhibition was to explore the themes of caste, class, and classification through the works of Juan Rodríguez (1675-1728), the echoes of these themes in the “scientific” approaches of the period were also included. Before addressing this “scientific” point, let us ask the question: Why were these five paintings so important? And for whom were these paintings made?

Munroe (2023a) explains the purpose of the paintings in exhibition as follows: “The original set is thought to have been created by Juan Rodríguez Juárez, commissioned by the Viceroy of Mexico to be delivered to King Charles of Spain, to show how the races could be brought back to white through racial dilution. Unfortunately, the King did not share this same sentiment and sent the paintings back, with the note that this was ‘unpurifying’ the Spanish Bloodline and this was not something to be celebrated. These paintings were then used as a form of visual representation that assisted people to be identified by their physical appearance.”

When she examined the paintings in detail, she realised that they included people of colour, in family settings. In the exhibited paintings showed a mixed-race family, including a black female, a white male, and a mixed-race child. *Casta* paintings depict domestic scenes featuring interracial couples and their children. As noted in the family portraits section of the exhibition, each portrait is accompanied by written descriptions detailing the genetic backgrounds of the individuals. These

descriptions, at times, employ less favourable language, occasionally resorting to animalistic terms.

**Figure 1. Example of Casta paintings**



De Espanol y Negra produce Mulato (A Spaniard and a Black produce a Mule), oil on canvas, 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The experts who prepared the exhibition project have established that the military uniform in this painting (figure 1) was worn by members of the Spanish Army between 1760 and 1790. As mentioned earlier, clothing, accessories, and other objects in Casta paintings indicate social positioning. Figure 1 shows a group of people in a kitchen-like space. From the woman’s dress and the headdress, she wears, it is thought that she is a maid. The embroidery on her clothes are patterns belonging to the natives of the region.

As Munroe emphasised (2023b), “on this image, there are some tell-tale signs about the painter or painters, as it would appear that different people may have painted different sections, just to the high quality of the males’ detail, compared to the way the female, who some of her has been painted out of perspective and has a very poorly drawn hand.” The paintings depict people using non-human concepts and often include zoological terms in the descriptions. This framework is another dimension of the tradition of the stereotyping of people of colour with certain racial prejudices in the art history. In many cases, it is common to see people of colour stereotyped as exotic, wild, primitive.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, during an era when the Spanish wielded colonial authority, these artworks emerged. At that juncture, Mexico was designated as “New Spain,” where notions of racial hierarchy, grounded in biological factors and surface-level visual distinctions, were actively formulated

and implemented as a means of reinforcing authority. This situation was visualized in the exhibition with the social structure pyramid.

The exhibition featured a pyramid of the social structure in Mexico in the 18th century. According to this, Indigenous people were at the bottom. The pyramid, divided into 7 groups, was as follows from top to bottom: “Spaniards (white individuals born in Spain), Criollos (offspring of the Spaniards born in the Americas), Mestizos (people of mixed European and Indigenous ancestries), Mulatos (people of mixed European and African ancestries), Zambos (people of mixed Indigenous and African ancestries), Africans (people of African descent), Indigenous (Indigenous Indians who would not convert)” (From the texts in the exhibition, 2023). The following statements were included in the artistic representation of people of colour section of the exhibition (2023): “For much of art history, people of colour have often been depicted using stereotypes that reinforced racial biases and hierarchies.” For instance Andrés de Islas, one of the Casta painters, introduced character traits, giving negative views of people of colour.

The exhibition also highlighted the connection between this genre of painting and the scientific developments of the period. A section demonstrated how the ideas of male scientists from various disciplines, including philosophy, anthropology, and medicine, were closely linked to racism. As clearly and explicitly expressed in the exhibition (2023), “throughout the 1700s and 1800s, many European scientists wrote about people of colour using theories based on personal opinions rather than facts, using a form of pseudo-science to justify their theories.” In this part of the exhibition, racist discourses in the scientific approaches of the 18th and 19th centuries were presented in detail. This was quite remarkable and impressive. From philosophy to medicine, the racial classification of people under the title of “science” was openly exposed. For example, this section of the exhibition featured David Hume’s (1711-1776) ideas, which placed a strong emphasis on white supremacy. The exhibition included an excerpt from Hume’s “Of National Characters”, under the title “Philosophy of Racism”: “I am apt to suspect the negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kind) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilised nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturer amongst them, no art, no sciences” (1753-2023). Another example in the exhibition was Edward Long (1734-1813), whose views were included under the title “One Drop System”. He was born in England, but it is important to note that his family had owned property in Jamaica since its colonization. In his book “The History of Jamaica”, he made racist remarks about Africa, Africans, and people of African origin: “of Afric, that parent of everything that is monstrous in nature” “the most odious and despicable character, as proud, lazy, deceitful, thievish, addicted to all kinds of lust, and ready to promote them in others, incestuous, savage, cruel, and vindictive, devourers of human flesh, and quaffers of human blood, inconsistent, base, and cowardly, devoted to all sorts of superstition, and in short, to every vice that come in their way” (1883-2023). Long’s



ideas shaping British colonialism are very similar in character to the human taxonomy of Casta paintings. Casta paintings reflect the “scientific” classification principles of the Age of Enlightenment in terms of form. It was shown that the scientific and artistic understanding of the period reproduced racism. *Casta: The Origins of Caste* delved into the dynamic relationship among visual art, science, and racism, with a specific focus on the Casta paintings.

**Figure 2. Example of Casta paintings**



**Figure 3. Example of Casta paintings**

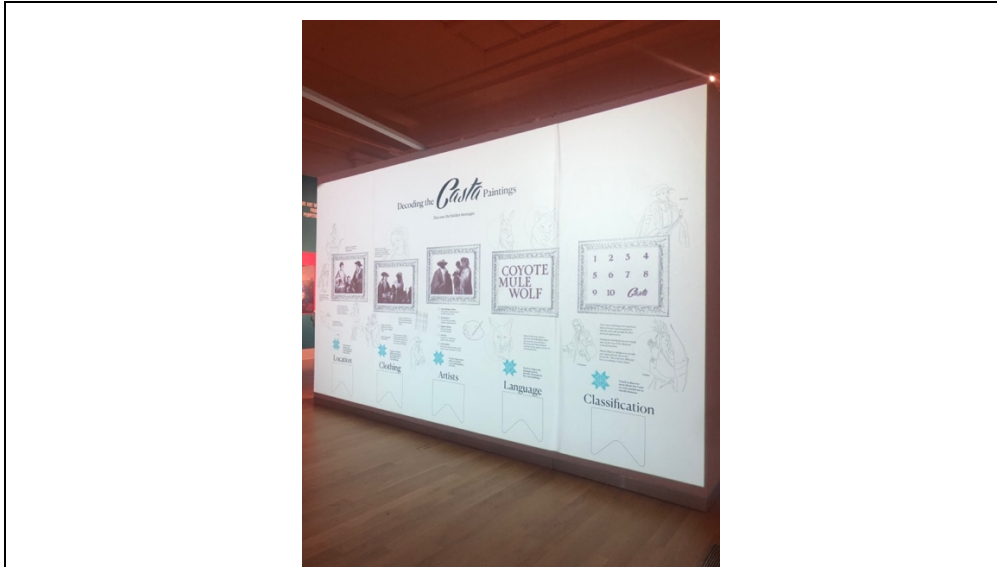


The people in Casta paintings are a representation of their position in the social hierarchy through their clothing and jewellery. Figure 2 shows that there is a boy with a Western appearance, a woman who is obviously rich from the jewellery she is wearing, and a man in local clothes. “Both the male and female seem to be in traditional dress, with both of them wearing the traditional Rebozo Shawls dyed red/orange using the Cochineal or cactus bug” (Munroe, 2023b). Unlike figure 2, the people in figure 3 are described as “barbarians” because they wear indigenous clothing and do not accept Christianity.

The ideas of the colonial authorities, which made great efforts to convert Indians to Christianity, were also reflected in Casta paintings. In these paintings, Indians in their local clothes who did not accept Christianity were labelled as barbarians. As Katzew (2004, p. 146) stated that, “to pair heathen Indians with nudity in casta painting was a potent way of conveying the ‘savagery’ of this group.” In a nutshell, refusing to convert to Christianity and continuing with local cultural habits was a sign of “savagery”. “In the image, they appear to be in a forest, and the father and son are both holding a bow and arrow. This image would have been the last in the set, which would mean they were the lowest cast that could be documented” (Munroe, 2023b).

Have notions of caste, class, and classification in the work of Juan Rodríguez lost their relevance today? Racial discrimination is a deeply embedded tradition. Hence, there are racist practices that continue today, perhaps not so directly, but still sometimes implicitly and sometimes explicitly. We must bear in mind that decolonization comprises tangible actions involving actual individuals, rather than being merely a rhetorical concept. Munro’s curatorial approach had valuable aspects, including the exhibition discourse that connects with the present and the portrayal of individuals without victimization. The exhibition’s narrative centres on structural and systemic racism, avoiding any portrayal of individuals as victims.

**Figure 4. General view from the exhibition**



The exhibition’s curatorial narrative successfully connects the past, present, and future without disconnecting the audience from the artistic context. The interactive area at the end of the exhibition included audience feedback. In this section, the audience was asked four questions using digital methods. These four questions are follows: Question one: Did the exhibition show the Casta Paintings’ historical significance and connection to racial hierarchy and oppression? Question two: Did you have an emotional response to the paintings? Question three: Did the exhibition enable you to understand racism in contemporary society? Question four: Overall, did the exhibition increase your awareness and understanding of the links between visual art, science, and racism? Analysis of the responses to the questions showed that the exhibition was understood by the audience and that they made connections between historical references and current issues.

## **CONCLUSION**

Casta paintings are visual forms that express much more than being an art product of a certain period. Casta paintings were not only representation of inter-racial mixing, but also tools for reinforcing colonial power dynamics. “Generally, Casta paintings appear in a series of 12 to 16 images, presented either as separate panels or as a grid of images on a single panel. Each Casta image depicts a family: a mother, a father, and one or two children. Each set of parents represents a different combination of racial groups or castes. The children resulting from those relationships bear the caste name that forms the title of the painting” (Olson, 2009, p. 310). As stated on the information panels in the exhibition, the Casta paintings genre was founded by the Viceroy of Spain. The Viceroy commissioned artists to

create artworks that portrayed the elimination of different ethnicities in Mexico through inter-racial mixing. The paintings were presented to King Phillip V of Spain to demonstrate the Viceroy's control over the local population. Originally painted as a series of 14, and informed pseudo-science of the day, they were used as a form of human taxonomy, which could be upheld as a registration of legitimacy. The registration would govern who you could marry, what jobs you could gain and what taxes you had to pay. They defined a society where one's racial background is used to predict or dictate their future pursuits, opportunities, and experiences from birth.

There is a direct relationship between the social status of individuals and the spaces where races are represented in the paintings. For example, Europeans are often depicted in leisure spaces. This is an indication of their privilege. In contrast, Indians and Indians mixed with Africans take part in working spaces. African women are shown as servants in the kitchen. Types of fabric, hats and clothing in general are also status symbols. For example, some of the Indians wore Madras textiles, indicating that they belonged to the working class. Casta paintings played a role in creating racial stereotypes and ideologies that supported discriminatory practices and systems of racial oppression. By visually portraying racial mixing as a predetermined and hierarchical process, Casta paintings reinforced racist beliefs about the inherent inferiority of non-European peoples. In summary, Casta paintings are linked to racism as they played a significant role in perpetuating racial hierarchies and justifying colonial oppression and discrimination based on race.

Casta paintings are pseudo-scientific images that show the path to achieving a "pure blood", and colonised bodies are often represented through the construction of family scenes. Inspired by the ideas of the Enlightenment, the visuals are an attempt to create an order of racial control. Today we can see Casta genre paintings in museums. However, it could be concluded that most audiences are illinformed about the racialised world that the paintings represent. This can be due to a variety of factors, including lack of education on art history, limited exposure to diverse perspectives, and systemic biases within the art world. *Casta: The Origins of Caste*, curated by Tara Munroe, is a worthwhile exhibition because it brings this visual world to the attention of the public.

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