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Posthumous Portraits of Children in Early Modern Spain and Mexico

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Death creates the greatest boundary of all, irrevocably separating the living from the dead, or so it would seem.¹ In Mexico, however, funerary traditions for children reveal an effort to establish an open network between life and death, whereby the deceased intercede between God and living family members. This concept is expressed visually in the painting and photography where the dead child is dressed as a religious figure, most often as a saint, angel, cleric, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary.² The origins of these representations lie in the Catholic belief that children, who die after baptism but before the “age of reason” (after the sacrament of first communion), are considered pure, and thus will ascend directly to heaven. In Mexico and elsewhere, these children are called *angelitos*, “little angels,” because Catholics believe that such children go directly to heaven. An early example of this comes from descriptions of the funerary rites of an eight-year-old, Valerio Marcello, who passed away on January 1, 1461, in Venice. In *The Death of the Child Valerio Marcello*, Margaret L. King describes how Valerio’s father, Jacopo Antonio Marcello, remained grief-stricken for years, alarming his friends who pleaded with him to free his household from “the toil of unalleviated sadness” (1). Several years after his son’s death, Marcello collected the letters, poem, consolatory treatises, history, eulogy, and apology that fourteen of his friends had written in Latin, and had them bound into a book, that King calls the “largest and most richly textured of the funerary collections of the Renaissance” (1). In Marcello’s book, an anonymous tutor attempts to console the father, not just by asking him to re-imagine his son’s death as glorious and triumphant, but also by referring to Valerio as an angel who had been freed from earthly suffering:

Then you, his father, viewing the lifeless body of your son, stand in the black night like a stone; and having made the sign of the cross over the body, flee into the shadows alone, and grieve mightily. The whole

palace is arrayed in black mourning, while heaven is adorned with festive banners. The mourning father dresses himself in black, and your son is robed in white, and borne to the funeral of the blessed angel Valerio. An angel, Valerio triumphantly enters the heavens; and we who are still on earth suffer. Unhappy, sorrowful, entombed by this calamity, we unwillingly live our lives. (King 21)

This passage, while referring to Valerio as a “blessed angel,” does not describe a funerary ritual in which the boy was dressed as an *angelito*; rather he apparently wore a white robe, in contrast to his father, who wore black. The mention of color here is significant, since Valerio wears white as a symbol of his purity.³

In Mexico—and elsewhere in the Americas—children, who, like Valerio, die at a young age, are believed to become angels who acquire the ability to mediate on behalf of the surviving family members who remain on earth. Visual and archaeological evidence, extending from the early modern period to the twentieth century, reveal the Mexican tradition of preparing children’s bodies for the afterlife by dressing them in the costume of religious figures. The deceased child—now masquerading as a supernatural being—is believed to acquire the characteristics of the holy figure whose costume he or she wears, thereby attaining the ability to act as messenger between God and the living. Thus, *angelito* portraits are windows onto a theatrical drama: the death and rebirth of the child, and the transformation of that child into an angel. In addition to portraiture, written evidence further supports the colonial practice of dressing deceased children as religious figures and helps illuminate the tradition.

Scholars often acknowledge Spanish roots for the tradition, since *angelito* attributes, such as the palm branch and floral crown that signify martyrdom and purity, are laden with Catholic symbolism, and because Catholicism was introduced to the Americas by the Spaniards during the Conquest. These “roots” have, until recently, only been traced back to the nineteenth century. My point of inquiry is to investigate the early modern Spanish origins of these funerary portraits, and then to suggest how this tradition may have taken hold in New Spain. In other words, I intend to offer a Spanish source for these paintings, as well as to challenge the notion that serves to support the myth of a unique “Mexican character.” At the same time, this does not detract from Mexico’s significant contributions to the *angelito* genre, namely a graphic representation of the rebirth of a deceased child as a supernatural, as well as continued popular and intellectual interest in the genre.

Defining *Angelitos*

There is a good deal of variation within the category of posthumous children's portraits, making it all the more important to carefully identify and define the types of portraits that are the focus of this essay. The word "*angelito*" has several meanings. It is a term of endearment used by adults when addressing small children; it is used to refer to a deceased child, who is believed at death to have become an angel; and finally, the term refers to the genre of portraits depicting deceased infants and children, particularly those in which the child wears a religious costume of a cleric or a supernatural, such as Jesus, the Virgin Mary, a saint, or archangel. The artistic genre is the focus of this essay.

For Catholic children who had not yet reached the age of reason, there were really only two possible destinations in the Hereafter: either the child was baptized, and, thus, would go directly to Heaven, or, if not baptized, it would go to *limbus infantium* (also called *limbus puerorum*), or "infantile" or "puerile" limbo, known more commonly as "children's limbo." Though the child would not suffer there, it would be deprived of the vision of God for all eternity (Toner 256).⁴ Françoise Loux notes the tragic fate befalling such children, stating, "La mort sans baptême est la pire chose qui puisse arriver à un enfant. Dans ce cas, il est mort sans véritablement exister; il est donc condamné à errer jusqu'à la fin du monde dans un univers intermédiaire" (253) (Death without baptism is the worst thing that can happen to an infant. In this case, it is death without ever having existed; the child is thus condemned to wander until the end of the world in an intermediary universe). The faithful parent of a deceased child might find some comfort in the knowledge that, because his or her child died after baptism, it would go directly to be with God. Moreover, a parent could reason that the premature death of his or her son or daughter was due to some higher purpose of the Creator. That higher purpose was to become an angel and serve as mediator and messenger between God and its living family members. In Mexico, Catholic parents of deceased children often responded visually to the question of "Why?" through painting and photography, thus rendering the death of their children, and their belief in the children's new existence, tangible and real.

Masking

An appreciation of the mask as a vehicle of transformation is critical in understanding the tradition of dressing deceased infants and children as religious supernaturals; the act of clothing a child as Jesus or the Virgin Mary not only likens the deceased to that supernatural, but also facilitates the most important transformation of all—the one that occurs at death.⁵ I

argue that religious costumes worn by *angelitos* function as masks, which, as among some African groups, can be considered the entire garment that covers the masquerader. Moreover, the religious costumes worn by deceased children function in the same critical way masks do; they effect transformation by concealing one identity and revealing another. For *angelitos*, the concealed identity is that of the mortal child, while the revealed identity is that of the reborn angel. In fact, masking—dressing the deceased child in clothing of a cleric or supernatural of the Catholic pantheon—was one of the most important funerary rites for dead children in Mexico.

Masks are often used during rites of passage when the initiate is particularly vulnerable. In this way, they are intimately linked to the idea of death and serve a protectoral function, in addition to being markers of transformation and group affiliation (Moya Rubio 17). The spiritual journey an individual takes from the world of the living to that of the dead may be considered particularly hazardous, which accounts for the number of funerary rituals, as well as proscriptions and superstitions surrounding death. Masks help protect the individual when he or she passes through the liminal phase of a rite of passage. *Angelito* masks conceal the harsh reality and finality of biological death, revealing instead a supernatural creature—an angel—who experiences a rebirth into a better world. Prior to burial, a child who has died may be considered to be in such a netherworld, neither living nor fully dead. Dressing the individual as a saint, Jesus, or the Virgin Mary not only suggests shared attributes and characteristics, but may also help to ensure its transformation from a living child to an angel. The reproduced image of the child as a saint or angel helps to concretize for the surviving family members the fact that the child has become a supernatural. Similarly, *angelito* masks confirm that the transformation from one social role (that of a living child) to another (that of an angel and mediator between the supernatural realm and the living) has occurred. The *angelito* portrait further reifies the conversion by helping the living recall that transformation, acknowledging that the deceased infant or child has left the social status of the living and has been initiated into the society of the dead.

Spain

In Spain, the history of the *angelito* genre begins not with visual records of children, but rather with written accounts that reveal the medieval custom of interring deceased adult monarchs in clerical garb. An early example of this can be found in an account of the death of the fourteenth-century queen, María de Molina, who died in 1321, after serving as regent for both her son, Fernando IV, and her grandson, Alfonso XI. The written description in the

Crónica de Alfonso XI describes the last moments of María's life. At that time, she introduced an element that, influenced by mendicant orders, added to the requisite sacraments and brought her even closer to the saints: "Et luego la Reyna se confesó muy devotamente, et recibió todos los Sacramentos de la Iglesia como Reyna muy católica, et vistiose el hábito de los frayles predicadores, et así dio el alma a Dios su Criador" (Martínez Gil 1996, 39) (And then the Queen confessed very devotedly, and received all the Sacraments of the Church as a very Catholic Queen, and she dressed herself in the habit of the predicator friars, and in this way gave her soul to God her Creator). Spanish monarchs perceived themselves as having led exemplary lives, and, therefore, deserving of a burial in which they were dressed as members of religious orders who have led pious, altruistic lives.⁶ While the accounts of María de Molina's death contain the first written descriptions of a Spanish ruler wearing mendicant clothing, she was not the first to engage in this practice. The recumbent statue of her deceased husband, Sancho IV (d. 1295), in the presbytery of the cathedral of Toledo, depicts him wearing a Franciscan habit, which attests to the earlier existence of the practice. The tradition of being buried as a nun or friar continued throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, when the Catholic Monarchs were buried in clerical habits; Isabel (1451–1517) requested in her will that she be dressed in a Franciscan habit, while Fernando (1452–1516) wore a Dominican one (Varela 18).

While Felipe III (1578–1621) was the last king to be buried in Franciscan habit, queens continued the practice for three more centuries; women were evidently far more inclined than men to be buried in religious garments (Varela 81). Beginning with the fourteenth-century death of María de Molina, queens and adult *infantas* elected to be dressed at death in clerical garb of their favorite order, the most popular of which were the Clarists, Carmelites, Franciscans, and Capuchins (Varela 81–82). Upon their deaths in the twentieth century, the *infantas* María Mercedes (1880–1904) and María Teresa (1882–1912) were dressed as Carmelites, and the Queen Mother Cristina (d. 1929) wore the habit of a Clarist.

Related to the practice of being interred dressed as a cleric, is the practice of representing royalty as sacred beings—a practice fairly common in Spanish art and extending to children and adults.⁷ Two early examples include a 1517 portrait of an adolescent Charles V depicted as Saint Sebastian, and a recently discovered sixteenth-century wall painting in the Descalzas Reales convent in Madrid.⁸ In the latter, the founder, princess Doña Juana of Portugal, appears as the Virgin Mary in an image borrowed directly from Raphael's *Madonna of the Fish*.⁹

Early examples of images of "deified" children can be seen in a group of four Spanish portraits—the daughters of Archduke Carlos of Estiria and María of Bavaria—probably painted in 1577 by the Flemish artist Vermeyen; these are now located in the royal Madrid monastery Nuestra

Señora de la Consolación, commonly known as the Convent de las Descalzas Reales.¹⁰ In each painting the subject is dressed in a richly brocaded court gown. In addition, two girls hold a palm branch, and all carry the attributes of saints, such as a pair of eyes, a lamb, or a broken wheel. Thus, three of the girls appear as St. Lucy, St. Agnes, and St. Catherine. The saintly attributes were most likely added at a later date, although it is unknown whether they were added before or after the subjects' deaths. While these paintings of princes and princesses depict living royal children, they form an important variation on the theme of representing deceased children as sacred or holy beings, which was later replicated in New Spain. Whether as living or dead, there is an intimate quality in these propitiatory paintings, where children are holding religious attributes, and where divine protection is offered through intercessor saints.

I know of only two Spanish portraits of deceased children. These portraits, also located in the Convento de las Descalzas Reales, date to the seventeenth century and depict deceased girls lying in their coffins, dressed as members of the Franciscan order (Figs. 1–2).



Fig. 1. Anonymous. ca. 1628. *Catalina María de Este*. Oil on canvas. 115 x 137 cm. Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales. Work in the public domain; photograph by Elisa C. Mandell.

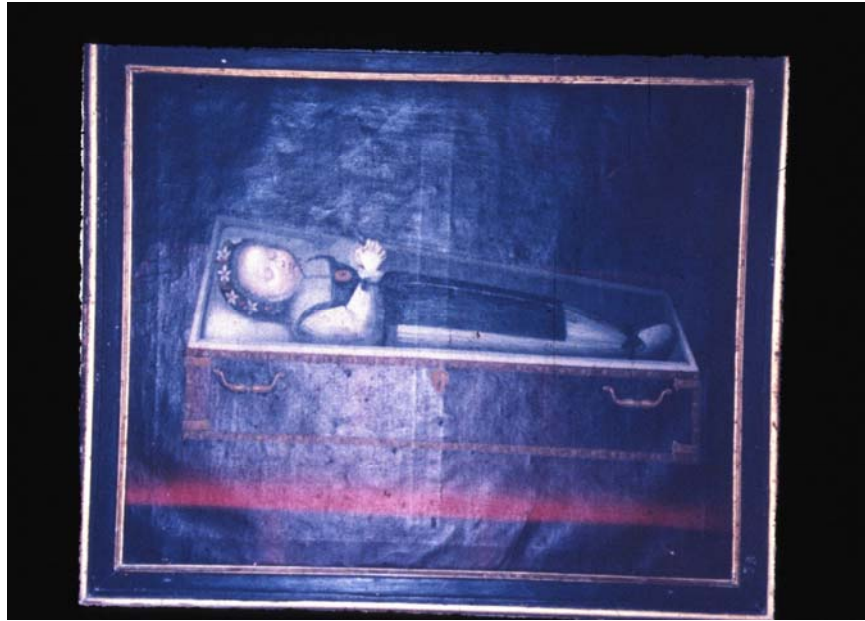


Fig. 2. Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, ca. 1603. *María/Margarita, daughter of Philip III*. Oil on canvas. Patrimonio Nacional, Madrid, Monasterio de las Descalzas Reales. Work in the public domain; photograph by Elisa C. Mandell.

The older girl (Fig. 1) has been identified as fourteen-year-old Catalina María de Este, the great granddaughter of King Philip II of Spain. Catalina died as a novice in 1628, before taking her vows. In the painting, she lies in a coffin and wears a dark robe or shroud that covers her bound feet. Along the length of her body lies the knotted cord worn by Franciscan nuns and friars. On her head, she wears a novice's white wimple, and a wreath of pink and white roses symbolizing her purity. At first glance, Catalina might appear to be an early manifestation of a Spanish *angelito*. However, since she actually was a novice, the classification of this image as an *angelito* becomes problematic. The image cannot be considered an *angelito*, which typically depicts a deceased child dressed in the costume of someone they never were in life. Here, Catalina is dressed in the robes of the novice that she was.

The other funerary portrait, possibly by the Spanish court painter Juan Pantoja de la Cruz, is of an infant girl, probably Infanta María, who died at one month of age in 1603 (Fig. 2). The daughter of King Philip the III of Spain and Queen Margarita of Austria, the newborn wears a white gown or

shroud with a black apron. Like Catalina, María wears a white wimple, which, here, is underneath a black bonnet that is decorated with white flowers, and a knotted Franciscan cord. However, this baby girl was too young to have been a novice, so it can be argued that this painting does represent a Spanish *angelito*: that is, a deceased child dressed as something she was not in life.

New Spain

In Spain, all of the visual and written evidence of individuals buried in clerical dress and painted as saints describe members of the royal family. The question remains, then, as to how the *angelito* genre, which appears to be based on Spanish funerary customs, first arrived in New Spain. I propose the genre was transported to New Spain by elite Spanish families. The 1756 death of the two-year-old son of the Viceroy Ahumada—one of the earliest-known descriptions of Colonial Mexican *angelito* exequies—illustrates this point. Don Agustín Ahumada y Villalón and his wife, doña Luisa María del Rosario de Ahumada y Vera (also known as the Marquesa de las Amarillas), left from Cádiz with their only son on August 4, 1755. They landed on September 30 of that year, on the beaches of “Santa Veracruz,” having made stops at the Canary Islands on August 14, and in Cuba one month later (Romero 49–50). Sadly, they had to employ their funerary traditions almost immediately, since their two-year-old son died the following March, just a few, short months after his family’s arrival in New Spain. As the child’s death occurred so abruptly, the family had not yet adopted Mexican burial rituals. Consequently, their mourning practices followed those prescribed by their Catholic belief and Spanish customs.

The description of the infant’s three-day funerary rites and rituals illustrate the particulars of early colonial funerary traditions in New Spain. One such particular was identifying the hundreds of mourners who represented all sectors of society and who participated in the exequies. For example, we know that the participants included military, royalty, nobility, governors, local rulers, attorneys, accountants, infants, children, musicians, choir members, and clergy representing the orders of St. Hippolyte, the Brothers of St. John of God, the Brothers of St. James (Dieguiños), the Bethlehemites, Jesuits, Mercedarians, Carmelites, Augustinians, and Franciscans (Castro y Santa-Anna 233–34). That a two-year-old boy would merit such an elaborate public funeral, one that combined the greatest military and religious pomp, and that it would be attended by important community members, including those who had traveled to the capital from Guadalajara, reflects the importance of his parentage and the significance given to the death of a Spanish infant of high social status, especially one

who was the only son of a Viceroy. The following description reveals an early example of a child who, following the custom established in fourteenth-century Spain, was dressed in death in clerical garb. As befitted a child of noble birth, no expense was spared when it came to the sumptuous casket and mortuary dress:

Esta misma mañana en la capilla del real palacio, pusieron una cama con colgadura carmesí de damasco de Italia, en la que estaba el difunto señorito, en un cajon forrado de terciopelo nacar, guarnecido de franjas de Milan de plata, con tapas, cantoneras, y tachuelas de plata de martillo, sábanas y almohadas de cambray guarnecidas con ricos encajes de Flandes: estaba amortajado de monge benito, guarnecido el hábito de ahogadores de diamantes de mucho precio, siendo la guirnalda de los mas costosos brillantes. (Castro y Santa-Anna 233)

(This same morning in the chapel of the royal palace, they placed a bed with crimson drapery of Italian damask, on which lay the deceased little gentleman in a coffin lined with pearly velvet, and adorned with silver trimmings from Milan, with covers, corner-plates, and tacks of worked silver. The sheets and pillows of Cambric were adorned with rich lace from Flanders: the corpse was dressed as a Benedictine monk, the habit of which was decorated with costly diamond chokers, making it the most expensive and lustrous garland.)

The rich details of the little boy's coffin and his Benedictine habit is consistent with the Spanish funerary tradition of dressing nobility and royalty in the habits of clergy.

One might expect that the Viceroy Ahumada would have commissioned a posthumous portrait of their son. In fact, a portrait now in the Museo Soumaya in Mexico City has been identified by Virginia Armella de Aspe as representing the two-year-old Ahumada boy (Corrales 32–33).¹¹ However, I have reservations about this identification; in addition to an absence of any identifying text, the subject is clearly dressed as the Christ Child, not, as the written texts describe, as a Benedictine monk. Although I have been unable to uncover evidence pointing to the sitter as being the son of the Viceroy Ahumada, the elite, fair-skinned boy—clearly of European descent—depicted in this eighteenth-century painting, nonetheless, represents an interesting and early example of an *angelito* portrait. Although the eyes are open, this image of a recumbent child is a reference to the sleeping Baby Jesus—a prefiguration of His sacrifice and death. The woman who appears to the child's right has been identified as the boy's nurse, although she appears with clasped hands, as in devotion before a depiction of the crucified Christ or Infant Jesus.¹² The reference to the sleeping Christ is reinforced in the way that his right foot overlaps his left, as is often

depicted in post-thirteenth-century scenes of the Crucifixion where one nail pierces both feet. His posture refers both to the reclining Christ, who appears prostrate on a bed with his head resting on a pillow, as well as to Ecce Homo and the captive Christ, whose arms or wrists are crossed and often bound. The reference to Jesus is further emphasized in the boy's clothing. He wears an ornate *sendal*, a short skirt with a large bow that extends from his right side. The jewel-encrusted skirt is of the same type that is seen in many Mexican paintings of Jesus on the cross, such as the 1716 painting, *El Señor de Chalma* by José de Mora. Because the painting represents a dead child dressed in a religious costume, the child is an *angelito*, although what is unique in this case is that the child is portrayed dead, but with open eyes. The infant's open eyes probably signify its re-awakening in the firmament; just as Jesus died and was resurrected, so, too, has this child been reborn in Heaven.

Just as the Spanish posthumous portraits were commissioned by royalty, so, too, were Colonial Mexican *angelito* paintings commissioned by and for the elite classes. As such, the decedent is often identified by his or her title of "don" or "doña" or, as being the son or daughter of titled parents. One such Mexican painting dates to 1760—just five years after the death of the Ahumada boy—and depicts five-and-a-half-year-old Don Thomas María Joaquín Villas y Gómez, dressed as a priest, wearing a black robe beneath a white surplice with pleated sleeves and a lace collar.¹³ The child—over whose body brightly colored flowers are strewn—appears recumbent on a narrow bed made with fine linens and ruffled pillows. Four large tapers in elegant silver candlesticks mark each corner of the bed. The boy wears a large floral crown, reminiscent of those worn by *monjas coronadas*, "crowned nuns." In his right hand he holds a flowering staff, and in his left, a *biretta*, or tricorne hat. The inscription in the upper right-hand corner of the canvas reads:

Rx D. Thomas Mari^a Joaquín Villas^f y Gomez, hijo lexit^{mo} de D. Lorenzo Xavier de Villas^f Regidor y Alcalde Ordinario q' fue d esta ciudad de Guadalax y de D^a María Josepha Gomez. murió a los 5 a^s y 8 M^s de su edad a 23 de Junio de 1760.

(Don Thomas María Joaquín Villaseñor y Gómez, legitimate son of Don Lorenzo Xavier de Villaseñor who was Regidor and Alcalde of this city of Guadalajara and of Doña María Josepha Gomez. He died at the age of five years and eight months on June 23, 1760.)

Because written sources indicate that important community members attended the Ahumada boy's funeral, including those who traveled to the capital from Guadalajara, it is possible that an important city magistrate of Guadalajara witnessed the Ahumada funeral, and when his own son died

four years later, the magistrate was inspired to commission a portrait of his son dressed as a religious figure. The portrait of five-year-old Thomas María recalls the early modern Spanish tradition of dressing the bodies of royalty in the vestments of clergy, as depicted in Pantoja de la Cruz's 1603 painting of Philip II's infant daughter (Fig. 2).

The *angelito* painting of Don Thomas forms a link to another Mexican painting tradition, that of the *monjas coronadas*, in which nuns are shown holding flowering palm branches and wearing large, floral crowns, hence the name "crowned nuns." Such portraits were created to mark one of two rites of passage: the celebration of her vows, in which the living subject appears standing; and her death, considered as the definitive encounter with Jesus, in which the decedent appears recumbent.¹⁴ While *monjas coronadas* portraits were especially popular in New Spain, they existed elsewhere in Latin America, particularly in Peru and Colombia. In the New World, the *monjas coronadas* portraits of professions have been traced to depictions of Santa Rosa of Lima, the first American saint, and their popularity spread to New Spain by the seventeenth century.¹⁵ The antecedents for posthumous portraits of *monjas coronadas* on their deathbeds comes from Spain, although those portraits are more austere than the viceregal ones (Montero Alarcón 16–17; Elizabeth Perry 336).¹⁶ The posthumous portraits of nuns bedecked with grand floral crowns and flowering staffs, and whose bodies were covered with a plethora of flowers, are visualizations of the Catholic belief that floral death was reserved for those just souls whose pathway to Heaven and eternal glory was a joyous one, free from the penalties to which ordinary humans are subjected (Montero Alarcón 30). For this reason, Montero argues that the iconography of *monjas coronadas* is visually and conceptually similar to that of *angelitos* (30–31). However, while posthumous paintings of *monjas coronadas* depict nuns with religious attributes representing their glory in death, *angelito* portraits depict children wearing the mask of something they never were in life—a cleric, saint, angel, the Virgin Mary, or Jesus. *Angelito* portraits, such as that of Don Thomas María Joaquín, depict a real transformation of an ordinary mortal child into one with supernatural abilities (in this case, into a priest who is able to communicate directly with God).

Written evidence helps modern readers to further understand other ideological distinctions made by the people of New Spain regarding deceased adults versus children. Half a century later, a royal decree sent by Carlos II from Madrid on March 22, 1693, outlines the parameters for decorating the caskets of adults, contrasting them with those of children:

que los ataúdes en que se llevaren a enterrar los difuntos, no sean de telas, ni colores sobresalientes, ni de seda, sino bayeta, paño o lanilla negra . . . y galón negro o morado, por ser sumamente impropio poner colores sobresalientes en el instrumento donde está el origen de la

mayor tristeza, y sólo se permite que puedan ser de color y de tafetán doble . . . los ataúdes de los niños hasta salir de la infancia, de quienes la Iglesia celebra misa de ángeles. (Rodríguez Alvarez 270)

(the coffins in which they bring the deceased for interment should not be of [fine] fabric, nor brilliant colors, nor of silk, but of baize, black flannel, [plain] cloth, or . . . black or purple braid, for it is extremely improper to use vivid colors for the instrument that is the origin of the greatest sadness, and it is only permitted that color and double taffeta be used for the coffins of children until they have left infancy, for whom the Church celebrates the mass of angels.)

By distinguishing between the caskets of adults and those of children, this royal decree implies a difference in attitude towards the death of an adult and that of a child. The visual trappings of an adult's funeral should be black (or purple), and only certain materials may be used, reflecting the notion that the death of an adult is a moment of great sorrow. On the other hand, a child's funeral may include luxurious materials and bright colors, reflecting a rite of passage that is not conceptualized as a melancholy event, but, rather, as one that is intended to be a joyous celebration of the decedent's ascension to Heaven.¹⁷

Distinctions between the caskets of adults and those of children, as expressed in the 1693 royal decree, have been substantiated by Arturo Oliveros's archaeological excavation of the colonial church of San Juan Bautista in Tlayacapan, Morelos, Mexico. The findings in the church (which was part of a monastic compound founded in 1534), reveal a child's white coffin which is decorated with a painted winged angel, on top of an adult's black coffin.¹⁸ It is thought that the child died sometime after March 7, 1809, which is the death date inscribed on the adult's coffin below it (Oliveros 33). The differences between the adult's and the child's casket is striking. Overall, adult caskets were black and decorated with designs in white paint, while adolescent and children's caskets were often decorated in blue, red, brown, yellow, green, and pink on a white or light blue background (Oliveros 33). In addition to geometric and floral designs, children's coffins could also include the face of an angel flanked by wings, or a standing angel holding the hand of a child.

Due to the high quality of preserved burial costumes found on the mummified remains of children at the church of San Juan Bautista, it is possible to identify the textiles that were used in the children's religious costumes. Many were made of imported materials and adornments, including Chinese silk, wire, sequins, lace, china paper, felt, satin, silk brocade, ribbons, muslins, European lace, relics, votive objects, and appliqués (Oliveros 50, 57). However, while many of the materials were foreign, Oliveros points out that some of the textiles were of indigenous

origins, including those made of cotton, wool, *ixtle*, and *ícatl*, the latter of which he calls an “indigenous/mestizo” technique similar to batik (57). Oliveros has identified the burial clothing of the children interred in this church as representing choirboys, virgins, and saints, specifically the Virgin of Guadalupe, the Immaculate Conception, and Saints Paul and Ignatius.¹⁹

Those dressed as pages hold a scepter and three wooden nails that are covered with a thin laminate of either silver or tin, which, according to Oliveros, signifies the Passion or an allegory of Saint Augustine. The latter conforms to the local ecclesiastical mission, since the church is part of an Augustinian monastic complex and is located in a region controlled by Augustinians. However, given Saint Augustine’s attributes of the flaming heart and arrows, it is possible that the reference is to the Passion.²⁰ On the other hand, Oliveros surmises that the scepter or baton could refer to an official, civic, or religious capacity that the child would have inherited had he not died.

The distinctions between the caskets and clothing of adults and children indicate that, from the perspective of colonial Catholics, it was highly improper to use bright colors within the context of the death of an adult. After all, unlike children, adult souls faced an uncertain destiny. That the 1693 royal decree stipulated that color and double taffeta (a luxurious cloth compared to the loosely woven, rough fabrics used for adults) were only permitted for the deaths of children, indicates a different attitude toward the death of a child.

Many of the same key concepts regarding death and the Hereafter remain in place today. In the Catholic faith, an adult faces uncertainty at his or her death; he or she may go to purgatory or hell. A baptized child will, with all certainty, go directly to heaven upon its death, and so *logically*, his or her death should not elicit the same reaction—or attitude—that an adult’s should. In spite of this certainty regarding the final destination of a deceased child, Araceli Colín has interviewed parents from Malinalco who have lost a child, and she documents their profound grief, despite wakes described as joyful and funerary rites that include game-playing and singing (114–18).

Examining the Cult of Death in Mexico

The question of why the *angelito* genre developed in Mexico is complex, to be sure, and it is compounded both by the propagation of a Mexican cult of death, and by the fact that some scholars have asserted that the *angelito* genre is unique to Mexico; that it is, “. . . un fenómeno cultural mexicano . . .” (Sánchez Lacy, trans. Kurt Hollander 23, 82) (a Mexican cultural phenomenon). Although child sacrifice in Mexico can be documented in Pre-Columbian civilizations dating from the Formative

Period to the Late Postclassic, I have argued elsewhere that continuity of Pre-Columbian—particularly Nahuatl—beliefs regarding child purity and child death, while very similar to Catholic ones, cannot be supported as a principle factor for the existence of the *angelito* genre in Mexico (Mandell 98–137). This is due, in part, to a lacuna more than two-hundred years in duration, between the introduction of Catholicism in the early sixteenth century, and the appearance of the earliest-known *angelito* portrait in mid-eighteenth-century New Spain. In addition, the existence of a few isolated photographs from Venezuela and Guatemala, and numerous ethnomusicological reports of lyrics sung at children’s funerals throughout Latin America, do not support ancient, Mesoamerican roots for these traditions. In fact, in his monograph of music and song played at children’s funerals, John Schechter writes that the Catholic tradition of a festive wake for children was celebrated in a number of Caribbean, and Central and South American countries during the late eighteenth century (1).²¹ These examples certainly document the existence of *angelito* funerary traditions similar to those in Mexico, and it is entirely possible that more examples of the visual genre exist outside of Mexico in private family collections.

As *angelito* portraiture makes its earliest-known appearance in eighteenth-century New Spain, it may be supposed that the genre develops as part of the construction of a national identity. I suggest, however, that the genre contributes to the illusion of a national death totem in Mexico.²² Indeed, for many, death occupies a sensational place in the imagination of Mexico, one that is filled with Nahuatl *tzompantli* (skull racks) and *Días de los muertos* or “Days of the Dead” *calaveras* (skulls). And, just as popular interest in Mexico’s *Días de los muertos* grew in the twentieth century, I suspect that interest in the Mexican *angelito* genre likewise blossomed during this time, aided in part by the publication of scholarly articles and the interest of artists in this subject. For example, Diego Rivera was an editor of the bilingual Spanish and English journal *Mexican Folkways*. The 1930 issue was devoted to death and included an article by Elsie Clews Parsons called “Entierro de un *angelito*,” which the editors translated as “Ritual for a Little Angel.” Frida Kahlo must have known of this particular issue, and she painted *El difuntito Dimas Rosas a los 3 años de edad* (“The Dead Dimas Rosas at Three Years Old”) seven years later, in which the corpse of a little boy, dressed at Saint Joseph, is laid out on straw mat.²³

The enduring interest in *angelito* portraiture is further illustrated in a 1995 painting, *Secret Formula*, by Arturo Elizondo, which borrows directly from a photograph reproduced in a 1992 edition of *Artes de México*.²⁴ Interest in this particular issue was so great, that in 1998, *Artes de México* reissued volume fifteen, incorporating recent artworks by Elizondo and Arturo Rivera. The popularity of the genre in Mexico today is confirmed by entire exhibitions dedicated to the subject, including the 1998–1999, “La muerte niña” (Child Death) at the Museo de la Secretaría de Hacienda y

Crédito Público in Guadalajara, and, more recently, a 2007 exhibit in Mexico City called “Lo irrepresentable: muerte niña—la colección de Museo Soumaya” (The unrepresentable: child death—the collection of the Museo Soumaya). I suspect that interest in the Mexican *angelito* genre, and specifically the belief in its singularity, is wedded to the notion that a cult of death is an integral part of Mexican national identity.

That the *angelito* genre kindles the illusion of a Mexican death totem fits Roger Bartra’s model in which intellectuals codify a stereotype (Bartra 2)—in this case Mexico’s special relationship with death—which is, in turn, recreated and promoted in society (by artists and curators, for example), thereby generating the appearance of a popular mass culture.²⁵ Bartra, for his part, debunks the notion that Mexicans mock and have disdain for death, and that the more Indian an individual, the greater his attraction to death. Bartra writes, “This legendary crucible has inspired the myth of the Mexican indifferent to death, the man who disdains death; this is one of the most trite commonplaces of modern Mexican thought” (60).²⁶ Néstor García Canclini further argues that popular culture is fabricated, rather than being a preexisting tradition (García Canclini 146), a notion illustrated here, both by the influence of scholarly texts on *angelito* paintings and by the increasing interest in the genre on the part of museums.

While in Mexico death has become associated with national identity (thus driving the interest in *angelito* portraits, making them more visible and more popular), the same is not true for other Latin American countries, whose concept of national identity is not associated with death. I believe it is likely that *angelito* portraits exist elsewhere in the Americas, but they are less visible, perhaps buried in family photo albums or in drawers. For some, then, *angelito* paintings and photographs reaffirm a Mexican death totemism, fueling the popularity of that notion. In other words, because these images have a different value in Mexico, they have been collected by photographic archives, art galleries, and museums, where they have been the focus of special exhibitions devoted to the genre. The widespread and enduring interest in the *angelito* genre in Mexico is evident in uncountable numbers of *angelito* photographs in public and private collections, as well as in photographic archives and databases. Romualdo García’s turn-of-the-century photograph of a little boy dressed as a bishop (with a miniature *biretta* placed on his head), is but one example of the expression of the genre in this medium (Fig. 3). In addition, it is in Mexico where the *angelito* genre has received the attention of twentieth-century artists. Thus, rather than ask why the *angelito* genre developed in Mexico, the question is perhaps better rephrased thus: “Why, in Mexico, has the *angelito* genre received so much attention?” The answer has much to do with essential ideas of Mexican national identity, and, specifically, the attitude toward, and embrace of, death.



Fig.3. Romualdo García, n.d. *Dead Infant Dressed as a Bishop*. Gelatin silver print. Work in the public domain; photograph by Elisa C. Mandell.

Conclusion

This analysis of the *angelito* genre in Spain and New Spain was undertaken with a dual purpose: to better understand the origins of this particular type of posthumous portraiture, and to nuance the too-simplistic claim that the *angelito* genre represents a Mexican cultural phenomenon. I have argued that the genre is not unique to Mexico, but, rather, that it originated in Spain during the early fourteenth century as an elite tradition that was subsequently carried to New Spain, at least as early as the mid-eighteenth century. Furthermore, the *angelito* tradition in New Spain reflects the geographical fluidity of the genre, rather than any significant indigenous influences.

Those who believe that the *angelito* genre is unique to Mexico, find in it a remarkable expression of a close affiliation between Mexicans and death. However, this facile link between images of *angelitos* and Mexican identity precludes an understanding of the hybridity of such representations. Many innovations and contributions made in viceregal New Spain coalesced into the graphic and vivid representation of a deceased child dressed as an *angelito*. Moreover, while the idea of dressing the deceased in the mask of something or someone that they were not in life originated in Spain, it is in

New Spain in particular—and the Americas in general—that these innovative portraits had a lasting impact.²⁷ Moreover, it is in Mexico that the genre is transferred from painting to photography, which in turn influenced painting, even up to the late-twentieth century.

I have argued that the religious costumes—which I consider the defining characteristic of *angelito* portraits—function as masks as a way to protect the vulnerable decedent, and as a vehicle to expedite the transformation from human child to supernatural angel. By dressing the infant or child as a supernatural, the transformation is cemented. Moreover, by immortalizing that physical transformation in a painting, the image also acts as a tool that parents and family members can use to recall the special event, and to announce the important roles their sons or daughters, brothers or sisters, now play as angels who have the ability to mediate on their behalf and who will, one day, escort them to Heaven.

Notes

1. This essay forms a portion of a manuscript in preparation on the *angelito* genre in Mexico and Spain, which is based on dissertation research. I would like to warmly thank my dissertation advisor, Cecelia F. Klein, and committee members Charlene Villaseñor Black, Robert L. Brown, and Kevin Terraciano. I am indebted to the Mexican scholars and gallery owners, Yolanda Gerson, Gutierre Aceves Piña, Daniel Liebsohn, Araceli Colín, Ava Vargas, and Héctor Palhares Meza, who made their collections and insights available to me, and I am, likewise, grateful to Fernando Martínez Gil, Javier Portús Pérez, Ana García Sanz, and Leticia Sánchez, the scholars in Spain who graciously conferred with me and allowed me to photograph their collections. For their enthusiasm and insights, I owe a debt to Joanna Roche and Christopher Slogar, my colleagues at California State University, Fullerton. I want to deeply thank the tirelessly devoted Constance Cortez and John Beusterien at Texas Tech University, the editors of this anthology, for their suggestions and acumen, and for their wisdom in producing this volume on death in the Hispanic world, which developed out of the delightful Early Modern Image & Text Society Conference that they organized in October 2008.
2. The first and second editions of *Artes de México* are dedicated to this genre and contain numerous excellent examples. *Artes de México* 15 (1992 and 1998).
3. While infants and children were often dressed in white and buried in white coffins (symbolizing their purity), there are exceptions, notably that of Queen Victoria (1819–1901), whose corpse was dressed in a white gown, white wedding veil, and was surrounded by white flowers. In other words, at death, eighty-one-year-old Queen Victoria was dressed as a virginal bride (Curl 249–50).
4. Gutierre Aceves Piña notes that children were usually baptized at eight days, although Catholic dogma does not specify the age at which a child should be baptized (1988, 21).
5. Sidney Kasfir uses the term “vehicles of transformation” in her discussion of African masquerade (1–16).
6. A related tradition involved widowed queens dressing as nuns during their lifetimes, when it was customary for highborn women to shun regular dress for a clerical habit

- at the deaths of their husbands. Perhaps the best-known example is María of Austria (1528–1603), daughter of Carlos V (1500–1558) and Isabel of Portugal (1503–1539). Although María never became a nun and did not live cloistered, once widowed she dressed as a nun, which is how she is depicted in several paintings. For further reading, see: Orso 1989; Bilinkoff, 181–92.
7. Queen Margarita of Austria (1584–1612), who commissioned Juan Pantoja de la Cruz's services, is responsible for the "radical inclusion" of recognizable faces of members of the Habsburg family in biblical scenes. In one, *Nativity of the Virgen* (1603), María of Bavaria, the Queen Mother, is shown giving the newborn her first bath, attended by two of her daughters who are traditionally identified as Leonor and Catalina Renata (*El linaje*, cat. 3.7, 259). In her catalogue entry, Leticia Ruiz writes that the tradition of so-called divine portraits, where contemporary individuals serve as holy beings (often a patron saint), or to introduce biblical scenes that had special significance for the subjects, developed in central Europe, where they were equally popular in Vienna as in the Descalzas Reales Convent in Madrid (*El linaje* 258–60). From central Europe, the practice was brought to Spain as a result of dynastic ties to Austria. Fernando Marias likewise attributes the popularity of child portraiture during the Habsburg dynasty to eastern and central European influences. See García Sainz and Ruiz; Marias (110).
 8. Circle of Juan de Borgoña. *Carlos V as Saint Sebastian*, 1517–1527. Oil on panel. Private Collection. Illustrated in *El linaje del Emperador* (cat. 3.2 [249]).
 9. Anonymous. *Doña Juana of Portugal as the Madonna of the Fish*. Illustrated in *El linaje del Emperador* (Fig. 2, [47]).
 10. García Sainz and Ruiz, p. 146. I was able to study three of the four paintings.
 11. Anonymous. *Caballerito Ahumada y Amhumada con su niñera*, 1756. Oil on canvas. Museo Soumaya. Illustrated in Corrales (33).
 12. In *fin de siècle* and twentieth-century *angelito* photographs, family members are often depicted standing beside the decedent, although it is uncommon for them to display clasped hands, as if in prayer.
 13. Anonymous. *Thomas María Joaquín Villas y Gómez*, 1760. Oil on canvas. Illustrated in *Artes de México* 15 (1998) (44).
 14. See the anonymous portrait. *Sor Josefa de Jesús*, eighteenth century. Illustrated in Alma Montero Alarcón, *Monjas Coronadas* (45).
 15. Montero Alarcón suggests that Juan Correa's portrait of the saint, located in the Santo Domingo convent in Mexico City, served as an important model for the cloistered nuns, as much for Rosa's virtuous life as for the iconographic traits (15–16).
 16. García Sanz and Sánchez Hernández claim that the tradition of adorning nuns with floral crowns begins in New Spain. The idea was copied in Spain where roses were added to finished portraits of nuns (137–38).
 17. For a comprehensive investigation of the joyous rites for a child's funeral, see Colín.
 18. Arturo Oliveros, *Las momias de Tlayacapan*. (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1990), p. 26.
 19. The church of Santa Elena in Yucatán also contains the mummified remains of infants, whose remains display colors and floral appliqué similar to those from Tlayacapan, although in this case it is difficult to discern any sort of religious costume. At Santa Elena, the coffins were often painted with vegetal motifs or small woodland scenes, often in red, yellow, and green on a white background. The funeral clothing, including little bonnets, often consisted of floral appliqué in blue, pink, and yellow on thin, white cotton (Márquez Morfin and González Crespo, 31).
 20. Some of the attributes of Saint Augustine are a flaming heart, symbolizing his

- religious devotion, arrows piercing his chest, and an infant in a cradle. He is sometimes depicted as a monk or a bishop with miter and crosier (Hall 35).
21. A more recent example includes “Largo viaje,” a 1967 Chilean film, written and directed by Patricio Kaulen in which the contemporary *angelito* funeral depicts the deceased newborn dressed as a tiny, winged angel.
 22. The notion that Death serves as Mexico’s national totem is explored by Claudio Lomnitz (23–27), who credits Spanish poet Juan Larrea with advancing the idea in his 1940s surrealist works. Claudio Lomnitz, *Death and the Idea of Mexico* (2008).
 23. Frida Kahlo, *The Little Dead Dimas Rosas at the Age of Three*, 1937. Oil/masonite, Fundación Dolores Olmedo Patiño A.C. Illustrated in *Artes de México*, 15 (1998) (47).
 24. Arturo Elizondo. *Secret Formula*, 1995. Oil/Canvas. OMR Gallery. Illustrated in *Artes de México*, 15 (1998), frontispiece.
 25. The popular interest in Mexico’s national cult of death is also reflected in the 2007 opening of the Museo Nacional de la Muerte in Aguascalientes.
 26. There also exists a similar notion that the Spanish national character has a special affinity to death. For further reading on this subject, see Carlos M. N. Eire, *From Madrid to Purgatory: The Art and Craft of Dying in Sixteenth-Century Spain*; Fernando Martínez Gil, *Muerte y sociedad en la España de los Austrias y La muerte vivida: Muerte y sociedad en Castilla durante la Baja Edad Media*. Toledo: Diputación Provincial, 1996); Manuel Sánchez-Camargo, *La muerte y la pintura española*.
 27. The viceregal *angelito* tradition, borne out of an Old World practice, has left a legacy that has created a new pathway, one that crosses national borders and which persists into the twenty-first century. This is documented nowhere better than in a 2000 painting by Los Angeles-based artist, J. Michael Walker that appeared in a 2000 *Los Angeles Times* story about a ten-year-old girl killed in gang cross-fire. The painting, commissioned by the parochial priest of Dolores Mission in Los Angeles, reveals Stephanie Raygoza depicted as a saint with butterfly wings and a halo; a crescent moon and stars appear over her left shoulder, and a weeping Sun appears over her right shoulder (Walker 25). In contrast to the detailed genealogical inscriptions that appear in some of the Colonial Mexican *angelito* paintings, here the text in Spanish and English reads simply “Todos los Santos de los Angeles; All the Saints of the City of Angels.” Walker, while not Mexican-American himself, is often exhibited alongside Chicano artists because the content of his work draws heavily upon Mexican and Mexican American themes. In his posthumous portrait of Stephanie Raygoza, Walker incorporated images and text from the condolence cards that Stephanie’s classmates wrote and drew, including pictures of Stephanie with butterfly wings and a halo, and the phrase, “nosotros extrañamos a Stephanie Raygoza. Ella era una Buena estudiante. Casi todos eran amigos con Stephanie” (We miss Stephanie Raygoza. She is a good student. Almost everyone was friends with Stephanie). Another inscription reads in English, “Good luck in Heaven!” reproducing one of the messages written by a friend and reflecting a child’s notion of death and the afterlife. Just as *angelito* portraits testify to the belief in the ability of a child to transform in death, this painting is a testament to the powerful and on-going force of the tradition whose early modern origins are European, but whose birth and growth are distinctly grounded in the Colonial realm of New Spain. Personal communications with Sybil Venegas (June 2008) and J. Michael Walker (August 2008).

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