CHAPTER SEVEN

EL ENCUENTRO DE CORTÉS Y MOCTEZUMA:
THE BETROTHAL OF TWO WORLDS IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY NEW SPAIN

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Introduction

During the Spanish viceregal period in the Americas, historical representations played a prominent role in fueling the imaginations of Americans and thus participated in the formulation of identity and its expression, in particular, among creole and mestizo elites. Colonial art historians have long recognized the active presence of historical images in New Spain, most recently by noting that secular painting was dynamic and reactive to the shifting socio-political environments of the viceroyalties.¹ According to John Urry,

how societies remember the past particularly reflects transformations in and of the present...what is thus the past is constructed in the paramount reality of the present...while the present is viewed as real, the past and future are ideational or...representational.²

By stating that perceptions of the past and future are ideational, Urry points out that memory’s basis is in the imaginary. The idea that present concerns determine how one perceives and/or reconstructs the past speaks of history as a metaphor. Historical narratives, then, although constructed around actual events and figures, are malleable and can take numerous forms, particularly when dealing with multiple authors working at different times and places. If history is determined, in large part, by the present, what kinds of references would be included, how would they be configured, and why? For instance, which aspects of lived experience and/or dominant

ideologies in New Spain inform the visual references in viceregal history paintings?

An anonymous eighteenth-century painting titled *El encuentro de Cortés y Moctezuma* is an ideal case for discussion because it presents a distinct interpretation of a ubiquitous historical subject in the American viceroyalty. The image depicts the initial meeting between the Mexica leader, Moctezuma, and the Spanish conquistador, Fernando Cortés (Fig. 7.1). This event was documented and represented in both written and pictorial forms throughout the Spanish viceregal period. Beginning with the eyewitness account by the conquistador Bernal Díaz del Castillo, references to this meeting include such things as the pictorial illustration in Diego Durán’s *Historia de las Indias de Nueva España* (1579–81), the later description by Antonio de Solís in *Historia de la conquista de México* (1684), and Juan Correa’s late seventeenth-/early eighteenth-century painted version on the *Biombo del encuentro de Cortés y Moctezuma*. Representations of this encounter typically portray the leaders facing one another and surrounded by their respective entourages. In certain cases, the two men are depicted in close proximity as they exchange introductory gestures. In the pictorial record, Doña Marina, one of Cortés’s indigenous interpreters and his concubine, is present only in certain instances; for example, we find her image in manuscripts, such as the sixteenth-century *Lienzo de Tlaxcala* and the *Florentine Codex*. In the historical narrative of the Conquest, however, she is understood to have been a constant presence at pivotal moments in the succession of events, including the initial encounter. Bernal Díaz del Castillo, recalling the precise moment of the historic meeting, wrote:

> When Cortés was told that the Great Montezuma was approaching, and he saw him coming, he dismounted from his horse, and when he was near Montezuma, they simultaneously paid great reverence to one another. Montezuma bade him welcome and our Cortés replied through Doña Marina wishing him very good health. And it seems to me that Cortés, through Doña Marina, offered him his right hand, and Montezuma did not wish to take it, but he did give his hand to Cortés and then Cortés brought out a necklace which he had ready at hand. . . . and he placed it round the neck of the Great Montezuma and when he had so placed it he was going to embrace him, and those great Princes who accompanied Montezuma held back Cortés by the arm so that he should not embrace him, for they considered it an indignity.3

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3 Díaz del Castillo (1933) 273. The emphasis of text in italics is my own and describes the exact moment depicted in the anonymous eighteenth-century painting.