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## A Bicentennial Tribute in Stained Glass

Historias Pequeñas Series



JOHN L. KESSELL

Among the most versatile citizens of Spanish colonial New Mexico, Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, who died in Santa Fe in 1785, even today leads a parade of heroes portrayed in stained glass at the Colorado State Capitol in Denver. But what, one may ask, is he doing there? Having just written a preliminary biography of don Bernardo, *Miera y Pacheco: A Renaissance Spaniard in Eighteenth-Century New Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013), I wanted to find out. I wondered too if the artist of the piece might still reside in Denver.

In 1976 the state of Colorado, unique among the fifty, commemorated two centennials: one hundred years since statehood in 1876 and two hundred years since independence in 1776. Thus the Colorado Centennial-Bicentennial Commission (CCBC), created in 1971 well in advance of this double milestone, went all out. Projects and events numbered “over 3,000.” These included the Southern Ute Inter-Tribal Powwow at Ignacio, “Un Día con la Raza” in Denver, and a revival of “The Ballad of Baby Doe” at the Central City Opera House. Most members of the CCBC had some idea of what was happening when the territory became a state in 1876, but few could tell you anything about the region in 1776.<sup>1</sup>

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Professor Emeritus of History at the University of New Mexico, John L. Kessell was founding editor of the Vargas Project, which, with the collaboration of Rick Hendricks, Meredith D. Dodge, and Larry D. Miller, resulted in the six-volume *Journals of don Diego de Vargas, 1691–1704* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1989–2002). Kessell’s latest book, *Miera y Pacheco: A Renaissance Spaniard in Eighteenth-Century New Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013) won the Weber-Clements Prize for 2014 of the Western History Association. He is retired just east of Durango, Colorado, in country mapped by Miera in 1776.

Back in the eighteenth century, Spain claimed all of what would become Colorado. Still mostly unknown to any but its Native American inhabitants, this region of the Rockies and Plains lay within Spain's ill-defined Kingdom and Provinces of New Mexico. Hispano traders had long ventured north into Ute country, but left scant impressions. Then in 1765, two little-known exploratory probes led by Capt. Juan Antonio María de Rivera searched in vain for silver as far as the Gunnison.<sup>2</sup>

Not, however, until the banner year 1776, when another Spanish "expedition" cut across western Colorado (northbound between today's Durango and Rangely), carefully recording their progress, did the future state have a hook to hang its bicentennial hat on. But who, the CCBC wanted to know, were these guys, and what were they doing out there?

New Mexico's colonial governor, hard pressed in the 1770s to defend the kingdom against Comanche raiders, had given these '76ers his blessing, along with a copy of Rivera's diary, but little else. If, with no military escort, these amateur adventurers thought they could open a path from Santa Fe to Monterey in Alta California, a goal of the central government in Mexico City, they were welcome to try. Scheduled to depart from Santa Fe on 4 July 1776, they did not set out until the 29th, however, because of a Comanche attack just south of the capital.

Hardly "a pageant in the wilderness," they numbered only twelve. Their inexperienced leaders, two visionary Franciscans, fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and diarist fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante, were relying on an veteran, Spanish-born civilian explorer and mapmaker, don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco. They never made it to California. An early winter and dwindling provisions turned them back. Nonetheless, they were the earliest Europeans to explore the Colorado Plateau and eastern Great Basin, circumscribing an immense, wobbly, 1,700-mile oval around the present-day Four Corners of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona.<sup>3</sup>

Two hundred years later, in the 1970s, Escalante's diary and Miera's map provided bicentennial planners with a heroic journey to commemorate. The Four Corners Regional Commission, with federal help, launched a ballyhooed re-enactment, wayside exhibits, and diverse publications. Meanwhile, each state funded its own projects.<sup>4</sup>

In Colorado the CCBC vowed not to slight the state's multiethnic heritage. The contemporary Chicano movement headed by Rodolfo "Corky" Gonzales frequently made headlines. A violent confrontation with Denver police in March 1973 at Crusade for Justice headquarters was still fresh in the public's mind.<sup>5</sup> Hence the CCBC's Ethnic Minority Council, among numerous other projects, resolved to honor outstanding individuals from the state's four largest minorities, "Black, Chicano, Native America and Oriental." Each would be portrayed in a stained-glass



Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco by Carlota D. Espinoza, stained glass, 1976. Colorado State Capitol, Denver. Photograph by Jim Steinhart, 2012. Photograph courtesy Jim Steinhart.

window installed at the State Capitol in Denver, a Colorado tradition. Subcommittees comprised of people from the four groups would “select both the subject of the window and the artists involved.”<sup>6</sup>

Seemingly an afterthought, the project was rushed to completion. The CCBC did not announce it until June of 1976, yet by mid-September not only had the subjects been chosen but also the artists. Denver santero and folklorist Carlos Santistevan recalls that the Chicano Subcommittee discussed several centennial subjects, among them longtime legislator Casimiro Barela (who already had a stained-glass portrait at the Capitol), as well as various members of the prominent Baca clan. Harkening back to the lone documented bicentennial presence in Colorado, the Domínguez-Escalante “expedition” of 1776, the subcommittee rallied around mapmaker Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco.<sup>7</sup>

Selection of an artist proved more contentious. Eight artists competed for the honor. Given only weeks to prepare her entry, Chicana muralist Carlota D. Espinoza of Denver even today remembers the stress. She had been working at the time on dioramas for the Denver Museum of Natural History and Science. Briefed along with the other project artists about the subject and expedition, Espinoza traveled to the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe, where she saw one of Miera’s maps. An individual who could have provided more details about Miera was out of town, and she had to get back to work in Denver.

Visualizing her subject as, in her words, “kind of a Spanish mountain man,” Espinoza submitted a small mock-up of her concept, a standing portrait of Miera with busts of Fathers Domínguez and Escalante on either side. Members of the Chicano Subcommittee liked it and voted to award her the commission. They asked her to prepare a paper version as large as the window, some five by eight feet, but she did them one better, producing a colorful, full-sized oil painting. Despite the rush, the Chicano Subcommittee of the Ethnic Minority Council of the CCBC had chosen well on both counts, subject and artist.<sup>8</sup>

Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco, born in the hill country of far northern Spain in 1713, had emigrated to New Mexico by the early 1740s. Although little is known of his youth and early training, over the next forty years he embraced his new life with unusual gusto. He married the daughter of an old-line New Mexico clan and raised a family. Like his neighbors, he farmed, ranched, and took part in military campaigns. But unlike most of them, he administered two of New Mexico’s eight districts. He also painted and sculpted the people’s favored saints while creating for New Mexico’s governors by far the most accurate maps of the colony to date. In short the resourceful Spanish immigrant reinvented himself as the quintessential Hispanic colonist of New Mexico and what later became Colorado.<sup>9</sup>

Carlota Espinoza had never heard of Miera before she entered the competition in 1976. When we met in Denver in April 2015, I was eager to learn who or



Carlota D. Espinoza and John L. Kessell, Denver, 28 April 2015. Photograph courtesy John L. Kessell.

what had suggested to her Miera's handsome, determined face. Was it a living person, her father or an uncle perhaps, or the portrait of a particular Spaniard? Neither, she assured me: it was pure inspiration.

Neither did Espinoza know of the one documented physical description of her subject. Modestly describing himself as a farmer, don Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco was in 1779, according to his enlistment in the Santa Fe presidial garrison, "five feet tall, sixty-five years old, his faith Apostolic Roman Catholic, his features as follows: gray hair and eyebrows, blue eyes, rosy fair complexion, straight nose, with full gray beard." Save for his blue eyes, Espinoza had envisioned her subject with uncanny precision.<sup>10</sup>

When the Elysian Stained Glass Company of Denver rendered her oil painting, however, she was not pleased. The glass colors were not what she had chosen. Mostly they were too dark, especially Miera's face. She asked the workers in the shop to take out that piece and give her a clear glass. Never having done so before, Espinoza "learned glass painting on the spot." Although she wanted to correct other features, there was no time. The CCBC insisted on unveiling and dedicating at least two of the windows before the next legislative session convened in early 1977. The ceremony for the Chicano and Black American windows took place in the Colorado State Capitol at noon on 7 January 1977, and Espinoza attended. Gov. Richard D. Lamm gratefully accepted the windows in the name of the people of Colorado.<sup>11</sup>

Almost forty years later, she explained to me some of the symbolism of her art. The dark blue area behind Miera's neck and shoulders represents the ocean he crossed. The four dots on his collar and cuffs symbolize the Four Corners. He holds in his right hand a small statue of the Virgin Mary and a paint brush, iden-



Carlota D. Espinoza and stained glass image of Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco. Colorado State Capitol, Denver, 28 April 2015. Photograph courtesy John L. Kessell.

tifying him as a sculptor and painter of religious subjects. In his left hand, Miera grips a mostly unrolled map and a cartographer's wheel.

On either side of Miera's central standing figure, somewhat below his waist, appear busts of his two Franciscan trail mates, both in the characteristic blue habits of New Mexico's friars. Father Domínguez looks straight ahead from Miera's left side (observer's right). Knowing that Domínguez was born in Mexico City, but not that he was as "Spanish" as Escalante, the artist gave him certain Mexican features. Father Escalante, a compatriot of Miera from the same region in Spain, looks very European. Below him is Spanish imagery framed by "the cord of travel." Below Domínguez is Mexican imagery inside "the cord of time."

Two profiles peek out from behind the fathers. Behind Escalante is a self-portrait of artist Espinoza in her early thirties, representing a Hispanic woman. An Indian looks out from behind Domínguez. Had the artist known more about her subject, Espinoza says she would have made the feminine profile Miera's daughter María, and the Indian the Paiute medicine man who tried to cure Miera's stomach ailment during the expedition.

Because Espinoza's ancestors came from northern New Mexico and the lower San Luis Valley, she graciously donated her preliminary, full-sized oil painting of Miera to the Cultural Center in San Luis, Colorado. It is currently displayed in a stairwell during the remodeling of the center.<sup>12</sup>



Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco by Carlota D. Espinoza, oil on canvas. San Luis Cultural Center, San Luis, Colo. Photograph courtesy John L. Kessell.

Carlos Santistevan of the Chicano Subcommittee, who favored both subject and artist, commented in the CCBC's final report that the stained-glass window of Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco "will long remain as a source of pride to all Chicano and Hispano people. It will serve as a constant reminder to all that Chicanos built this land, not as subjects but as fellow citizens."<sup>13</sup>

And so it serves today.

## Notes

1. G. D. Barrante, comp., *"Once in a Hundred:" Final Report of the Colorado Centennial-Bicentennial Commission* (Denver: A. B. Hirschfeld Press, 1977), 5.

2. A major study of Rivera and his two expeditions by Stephen G. Baker and Rick Hendricks is forthcoming from by Western Reflections Press in late 2015.

3. See Herbert E. Bolton, *Pageant in the Wilderness: The Story of the Escalante Expedition to the Interior Basin, 1776* (Salt Lake City: Utah State Historical Society, 1950). The book was reprinted several times leading up to and during the Bicentennial.

4. Two outstanding Bicentennial-inspired publications are Fray Angélico Chávez, trans., and Ted J. Warner, ed., *The Domínguez-Escalante Journal: Their Expedition through Colorado, Utah, Arizona, and New Mexico in 1776* (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1976); and Walter Briggs, *Without Noise of Arms: The 1776 Domínguez-Escalante Search for a Route from Santa Fe to Monterey* (Flagstaff, Ariz.: Northland Press, 1976).

5. "Chicano Shot, Killed, Police Wounded in Denver," *Albuquerque (N.Mex.) Journal*, 18 March 1973, A-2; and Neil Foley, *Mexicans in the Making of America* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2014), 168-70.



6. Barrante, "Once in a Hundred," 39, 88–91.

7. Carlos Santistevan, interview with author, Denver Public Library, 29 April 2015; and Barrante, "Once in a Hundred," 88–91. The subjects and artists chosen by the other three ethnic subcommittees were: Aunt Clara Brown, a former African American slave who became a beloved member of the community in Central City (artist Vernon Rowlette); Southern Ute Chief Buckskin Charlie (artist Eugene Naranjo) and Ute Mountain Ute Chief Jack House (artist Norman Dale Lansing, who shared the Native American window); Chin Lin Sou, Chinese entrepreneur (artist Chen Ting-Shih), and Naoichi Hokazono, Japanese entrepreneur (artist Yuriko Noda, who shared the Asian American window).

8. Carlota D. Espinoza, interview with author, Denver Public Library, 28 April 2015; and Espinoza, email to author, Denver, 8 May 2015.

9. John L. Kessell, *Miera y Pacheco: A Renaissance Spaniard in Eighteenth-Century New Mexico* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2013).

10. Quoted in Kessell, *Miera y Pacheco*, 138.

11. Barrante, "Once in a Hundred," 42, 88; Espinoza, email to author, 8 May 2015; "The Presentation of Stained Glass Windows to the Citizens of Colorado," Denver, 7 January 1977, Carlos Santistevan, private collection; and Kessell, *Miera y Pacheco*, 60, 113.

12. Espinoza, interview with author, 28 April 2015; and Espinoza, email to author, 8 May 2015.

13. Barrante, "Once in a Hundred," 111.