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## Remolding Mexican Identity: The Wax Art of Francisco Vargas in 19th Century New Orleans

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Remolding Mexican Identity: The Wax Art of Francisco Vargas in 19<sup>th</sup> Century New Orleans

Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
History

By

John Mangipano

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## Abstract

In December of 1915, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* reported on the death of the patriarch of four generations of Mexican wax figure artists whose artworks demonstrated a century of change in the city of New Orleans. The family's artworks included religious sculptures, representations of indigenous and peasant populations of Mexico, and the merchant populations of the French Quarter. Francisco's artworks represented Louisiana's agriculture at two World's Fairs in New Orleans and Buffalo. Francisco received a contract from Mississippi Commissioner R. H. Henry to produce the 30-foot *King Cotton* for the 1904 Louisiana Purchase International Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri. Though the family's success continued after Francisco's death, an examination into the family's business, artworks, travels, and personal connections during Francisco's lifetime provides a new avenue for exploring the relationship between New Orleans and Mexico in the nineteenth century.

Francisco Vargas, Mexico, New Orleans, Wax Art, World's Fair, Modernity, Immigration



*“At the St. Louis fair next year the state of Mississippi will exhibit King Cotton seated on his throne as representing the state’s greatest industry. The statue will be heroic in every respect and eclipse everything else molded in human form for size.” – The Biloxi Daily Herald, November 18, 1903<sup>1</sup>*

For seven months in 1904, tens of thousands of visitors to the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri, witnessed Robert Hiram Henry’s stoic face welcoming them to the exposition’s Agricultural Building. Months before the opening of the World’s Fair, a family of Mexican-born artists residing in New Orleans had begun creating a 30-foot representation of R. H. Henry, Mississippi’s executive commissioner of the World’s Fair.<sup>2</sup> Francisco Vargas, the patriarch of the family of artists responsible for Mississippi’s largest presentation at a World’s Fair to date, depicted Henry sitting on a throne with scepter in hand and black sharecroppers offering cotton to him at his feet.<sup>3</sup> Though Henry credited Francisco Vargas with the idea for the family’s monumental artwork, a project that earned the family a third medal for World’s Fair displays, *King Cotton* [see illustration 1 on page 2] represented the Vargas’ interpretation of Henry’s vision of cotton’s role in the twentieth century. Why would Henry hire Francisco Vargas, known for his primary trade in beeswax sculpting, to promote cotton, Mississippi’s prized cash crop? The name Vargas, behind the creation of *King Cotton*, resonated with realism and modernity, perceptions that Mississippi hoped would convey the place of cotton in

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<sup>1</sup> *Biloxi Daily Herald*, November 18, 1903.

<sup>2</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session Thereof in the City of Jackson* (Nashville: Press of Brandon Printing Company, 1904), Artist File: Vargas, Francisco, The Historic New Orleans Collection and Williams Research Center (hereafter labeled THNOC).

<sup>3</sup> Henry to Vargas, October 8, 1903, copy of letter, Artist File: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

Mississippi's vision of New South.<sup>4</sup> Vargas recreated an image of reality in an era when the public perceived wax art as an artistic channel to modernity. *King Cotton*, the family's largest and most public work, demonstrated Francisco's ability to mold a successful career by understanding the societies in which he worked and lived in while navigating ethnic boundaries using art and political connections.



. Illustration 1: *King Cotton*, <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/cph.3b43563> (accessed 25 April 2011).

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<sup>4</sup>The term “modernity” can be an ambiguous term. This paper focuses on the Western trend of understanding the state of being “modern” that included the goal of striving to understand the world through artistic and scientific pursuits that acknowledged globalization as well as nationalism.

The Vargas artworks were popular as both art and iconography of a time and place, linking their roots in Mexico with Louisiana while serving to document the social landscape of the family's new home. The Vargas family's Mexican heritage resonated in its artworks and connections, and the popularity of this Hispanic Catholic identity assured success throughout their travels in the Gulf South. Though the family's success continued after Francisco's death, an examination of the family's business during the life of its patriarch provides new avenues for exploring the Mexican population's cultural legacy in New Orleans from the end of Reconstruction to the beginning of World War I. Finally, an examination of the life of Francisco Vargas reveals that the family succeeded in its craft long before Mexican art gained national popularity throughout the rest of the United States in the 1920s. As Mexican art peaked around 1927, the third and fourth generations of Vargas artists were already continuing the legacy begun by Francisco in the 1870s.

*History of the Family's Life in Mexico, Travels, Business, and Major Projects*

Born in Mexico City around 1824, Francisco grew up as a Catholic in a region loyal to the Church.<sup>5</sup> In the 1840s, Francisco married his first wife; together, they bore two sons and a daughter. Jesus, Francisco's first son, was born in 1849.<sup>6</sup> Shortly after, Francisco Vargas, Junior was born.<sup>7</sup> In 1858, Francisco's final child from this marriage, Concepcion, was born in Mexico City where the children were raised.<sup>8</sup> Concepcion recalled learning many forms of art as a child in a school in Mexico City including oil painting, water colors, crayon, and mother of pearl.<sup>9</sup> Francisco enrolled her into school in the mid-1860s during the Second Mexican Empire under

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<sup>5</sup> John A. Mahe and Rosanne McCaffrey, *Encyclopaedia of New Orleans Artists 1718-1918* (New Orleans: Historic New Orleans, 1987), 391-392.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Only One Sculptress Here Carries Out Father's Work, Honors have Come to Both," newspaper clipping, circa 1910, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

Maximilian. While Concepcion studied in Mexico City, Francisco studied the art of beeswax sculpting under Jesuit priests seventy miles southeast of the capital and one hundred and thirty-one miles west of Vera Cruz in the city of Puebla de los Angeles. Though Francisco spent extended time away from his family while studying under the Jesuits, the relatively short distance between the capital and Puebla de los Angeles allowed for regular visitations with his family. In Francisco's absence, the older brothers helped to raise their younger sister, and demonstrated a sense of responsibility that would carry on into the family's business in Texas and New Orleans.

The family's connection with the Jesuit church indirectly linked their fate in Mexico with the eventual execution of Emperor Maximilian as well as the expulsion of the Jesuits subsequent expulsion of the Jesuits in the 1860s, two events that created an unstable environment in Mexico City and encouraged the family's migration to Texas. Mexican reformers, celebrating their victory over Antonio López de Santa Anna, set forth to create a new constitution. Though this constitution led to many new liberties for the population, it was designed to severely weaken the Catholic Church's power in Mexico by removing the Church from Mexico's most precious economic entity: land. Conflict within the Reform camp over the enforcement of the new constitution resulted in a civil war in 1858. The Jesuits had already fallen into disfavor during the earlier Mexican Constitutional Convention of 1856. Many of the new leaders feared that the Jesuits would disrupt the political unity of Mexico and voted to expel them from the country during the war.<sup>10</sup>

This war resulted in fleeing governments and burdening foreign debts to the United States, Spain, England, and France. As the civil war subsided in 1860, the new president, Benito

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<sup>10</sup> Walter V. Scholes, "Church and State at the Mexican Constitutional Convention, 1856-1857," *The Americas* 4, no. 2 (1947), 169-162.

Juarez, had to declare a moratorium on debt payments to the United States and the European powers. As a result of this declaration, Spain, England, and France invaded Vera Cruz in 1861.<sup>11</sup> Though England and Spain relented, Napoleon III set into motion designs for a new empire in Mexico that was to become dependent on France. Using veteran French Zouaves fresh off campaigns in Africa and experienced from the Crimean War, the French proceeded to launch a campaign to Mexico City that included the now infamous Battle of Puebla de los Angeles on May 5, 1862, that resulted in a Mexican victory and the solidification of the Reform leaders against the French Intervention.<sup>12</sup> After a year, the French returned to Puebla and captured the city, which caused the Juarez regime to flee Mexico City. Napoleon III then installed Emperor Maximilian and his wife Carlotta as the new imperial family in Mexico. The Jesuits found favor during the French Intervention, for the Mexican-Catholic exiles in France convinced Napoleon III to send a Catholic monarch into their nation.<sup>13</sup> Francisco likely entered Puebla shortly after these battles and studied under the Jesuits.

With the end of Maximilian's empire in Mexico and the expulsion of Jesuits in 1868, Francisco and his family departed from the capital and headed for Texas.<sup>14</sup> Traveling by a covered wagon, the family's route included the regions surrounding Monterrey and Tampico. By this time, Francisco was married to his second wife. His second daughter, Adelina, was born during the journey in 1869. Francisco followed a path shared by many Americans and Mexicans after the end of both the American Civil War and Maximilian's execution. But their destination raises questions, for they did not take the easier route through Vera Cruz to New Orleans.

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<sup>11</sup> Frederic Bancroft, "The French in Mexico and the Monroe Doctrine." *Political Science Quarterly* 11, no. 1 (1896): 30.

<sup>12</sup> Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, 302.

<sup>13</sup> Hanna and Hanna, *Napoleon III and Mexico*, 42.

<sup>14</sup> Adam Day, "Jesuit Peace in Mexico," *The North American Review* 228, no. 3, (1929): 356. A Jesuit priest named Father Fisher convinced Maximilian to stay in Mexico. His enemies believed that an alliance between the European invaders and the Jesuits existed.

Instead, they chose a longer, harder, and more dangerous route to the western part of Texas. The implications of this travel will be discussed later.

In 1870, Francisco Vargas entered Texas. During this stay, Francisco set up his shop in El Paso and called it Francisco Vargas & Sons.<sup>15</sup> Though Francisco named the business after himself and his two sons, his daughter Concepcion had already demonstrated her ability to learn art in Mexico City, and she helped at her family's business. Their travels in Texas also included work in San Antonio and Galveston. During the family's stay in Texas, Francisco and his children created religious works as well as figures depicting Mexican culture that highlighted nature, violence, and the exotic. While working for the local churches, Francisco befriended a man with Louisiana Creole connections named Giraud. Giraud wrote at least two letters of recommendation for Francisco and credited Francisco Vargas for his aid in preparing decorations for a festival hosted by a San Antonio Spanish Catholic church. Giraud addressed this letter to Augustin Toutant de Beauregard.<sup>16</sup> Augustin, the brother of General P.G.T. Beauregard, had entered the cattle ranching business in San Antonio before the Civil War.<sup>17</sup> A. T. Beauregard received this letter while in Buffalo, New York. Giraud mailed a similar letter to a priest in New Orleans. Giraud's letters demonstrate that Francisco had made connections that included at least one German client. Their stay in Galveston ended with a bad storm that inspired *The Virgin of the Assumption* [see illustration 2 on page 7] that is still in the family's possession<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>A copy of a business card. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>16</sup>Giraud to Toutant Beauregard, 1873, letter translated by Marie-Paule Griffith. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>17</sup>Philip Durham and Everett J. Jones, "Slaves on Horseback," *Pacific Historical Review* 33, no. 4 (1964): 405.

<sup>18</sup>Unknown newspaper clipping, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.



Illustration 2: *The Virgin of the Assumption*, privately owned by a descendent of Vargas.

In 1874, the family entered New Orleans for the first time. Before the storm in Galveston, the family already had plans to leave Texas. The two letters sent by Mr. Giraud requested assistance in finding work and customers for the family outside of Texas. After a brief stay in New Orleans, the family traveled the Eastern Seaboard and reached New York City and Buffalo, New York. Years later, Concepcion told her grandson, August Alfaro, about witnessing the building of the Brooklyn Bridge and complained that Buffalo was too cold for them.<sup>19</sup> After a few years, the family moved back to New Orleans where most of the family stayed for the rest of their lives.

In 1878, the family reopened Francisco Vargas & Sons in New Orleans and began selling figures in the French Quarter. By this time, Jesus, Francisco Jr., Concepcion and Adelina participated in the business. Francisco, now married to his third wife, fathered his last two daughters, Maria and Alta Gracia. Francisco submitted Mexican figures in local Fruit Grower's Association Fairs and advertised his ability to reproduce wax portraits of people based on existing illustrations of the prospective clients.<sup>20</sup> Despite winning awards in local fairs, the family struggled with sales during the early years and turned to other methods to increase profits. Part of Francisco's promotional strategy involved lottery drawings advertised through the local newspapers that offered wax figures as prizes.<sup>21</sup> These lotteries gained the family exposure and increased demand for Vargas' works over the years. The family also taught lessons in how to make wax figures.<sup>22</sup>

The wax lessons that Francisco taught to New Orleanians demonstrated the ability of the family to inject its Mexican based art into the French Quarter. One could find "pleasure and

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<sup>19</sup> August Alfaro, interview by Rosanne McCaffry, March 26, 1986, transcript. Artist Files: Alfaro, August, THNOC.

<sup>20</sup> "Fruit Growers' Association Sixth Annual Exhibition," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), July 11, 1879.

<sup>21</sup> "Raffle," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), August 03, 1880.

<sup>22</sup> Clipping of an advertisement. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.



profit, amusement and utility” in the trade of wax sculpturing. According to this advertisement, the family taught both the actual preparation techniques used in creating wax as well as the application of the wax to create wax models. In this case, the craft likely involved the mold technique, for that was the technique used by the family, though they were at least aware of the other techniques and likely used them from time to time. These lessons were given for two hours daily at prices ranging from six to fifteen dollars a month. At the bottom of the advertisement was printed that “the students will have no right to the articles manufactured by them – as the materials will be furnished by me (Francisco Sr.).”<sup>23</sup>

In the early 1880s, the family began creating figures inspired by the local black French Quarter merchants and vendors. According to Concepcion’s grandson August Alfaro, Adelina came up with the idea to focus on the production of wax figures portraying African-American New Orleanians that represented the city’s vibrant activities.<sup>24</sup> These figures “became popular to the exclusion of the earlier Mexican and religious figures.”<sup>25</sup> Francisco, Adelina, and Concepcion designed several dozen different figures of this genre. Including the newer ones designed after Francisco’s death, the total number of different characters molded is over a hundred and fifty. Concepcion claimed that tourists mostly purchased these figures looking to recapture a realistic image of their visit.<sup>26</sup>

In 1884, Louisiana Commissioner C.J. Barrow approached the Vargas family with a commission for them to produce a 40-by-40-foot wax garden featuring the various agricultural products of Louisiana for the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition. This project used a mixture of live trees and plants with wax fruits and flowers to display the diversity found

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<sup>23</sup> Clipping of an advertisement. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>24</sup> Notes from the interview of August Alfaro, May 17, 1984. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>25</sup> Mahe and McCaffrey, *Encyclopaedia of New Orleans Artists*, 390-392.

<sup>26</sup> “Wax Figures,” *Item-Tribune* (New Orleans), March 6, 1933, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

in Louisiana agriculture. The state commissioned the family to recreate cotton plants, orange trees, magnolia trees, sugar cane, banana trees, Japanese plums and over a hundred types of flowering plants.<sup>27</sup> Both Adelina and Concepcion participated in this project. The family won first prize for their presentation.<sup>28</sup>

As a result of the family's success at the World's Fair, Francisco's connections increased, and business improved. Francisco Vargas became a United States citizen in 1885.<sup>29</sup> C.J. Barrow asked the family to display its works in a regional fair a few years later in Baton Rouge.<sup>30</sup> When the works were not on display at world's fairs, many of Francisco's works were displayed in Baton Rouge. The family continued to create new black merchant figures. Francisco received positive coverage in the local newspapers including his hosting of a Mexican Independence celebration as a member of a local Junta Patriotica.<sup>31</sup> The family expanded its marketing to include the St. Louis Hotel and the front of the St. Louis Cathedral.<sup>32</sup> Concepcion continued her studies under the Ursuline nuns, and Francisco's two youngest children, Maria and Alta Gracia, were enrolled in Catholic school. Louisiana's government, once more, utilized Vargas' artworks for the 1901 World's Fair in Buffalo, New York, where the family won a second World's Fair award.

In 1903, the Mississippi Commissioner of Agriculture, R.H. Henry, commissioned the Vargas family to promote the state of Mississippi's agricultural economy in the 1904 Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>33</sup> Unlike the previous fairs in which the family had

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<sup>27</sup> Series of letters written to and from Vargas, 1884-1887 Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC

<sup>28</sup> Louisiana Writers Project, *Louisiana: A Guide to the State* (New York, Hastings House, 1941), p. 174.

<sup>29</sup> Wesley Sandel, photograph of Francisco Vargas' citizenship paper, 1979. Accession 1980.125.1, THNOC.

<sup>30</sup> Series of letters written to and from Vargas, 1884-1887 Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>31</sup> "Mexicans Meet to Celebrate The Anniversary of the Proclamation of Liberty. Patriotic Speeches by Consul," *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), September 17, 1893.

<sup>32</sup> "Wax Figures," *Item-Tribune* (New Orleans), March 6, 1933, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>33</sup> *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi at a Regular Session*, Artist File: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

taken part in for Louisiana, Mississippi did not ask Vargas to display the state's agricultural products. Instead, the family advertised Henry's vision of Mississippi's "Bright days of Restoration of the State" from the "Dark Epoch of Reconstruction."<sup>34</sup> Francisco constructed *King Cotton*, unlike his other major works, out of plaster of Paris. This work demonstrated the family's ability to expand its repertoire by creating a piece that strayed away from the works known for replicating reality. This 30-foot spectacle won the family its third award in a world's fair and cemented the family's status in the Gulf South.

After the family's triumph at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, Francisco achieved immediate success. Francisco and Concepcion toured the nation and continued to expand their motifs and designs. Francisco retired around 1910 but the family continued to receive media coverage regionally and nationally.<sup>35</sup> As Francisco transitioned into retirement, local newspapers refocused their attention to the family as a unit and to Concepcion as the new artistic head of the family. The younger siblings continued to assist the family. Though Francisco died in 1915, the family continued to produce new figures for roughly seventy-five more years. The remainder of this work will trace the family's travels, connections, and art to explain the family's success in New Orleans during Francisco's tenure as well as the relationship between Mexico and New Orleans that opened up opportunities for Francisco and his family.

### *Wax and Religion*

The choice of wax art benefited the family due to a greater Western trend of perceiving wax works as outlets for modernity. Though many of the family's artistic motifs were popularized in the United States after Francisco's death, the significance of Francisco's tenure in New Orleans begins with the history of the Catholic Church's influence on the artists in his home

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Hiram Henry, *Editors I have known Since the Civil War* (New Orleans: E.S. Upton Printing Company, 1922), 2.

<sup>35</sup> "Native Mexican Art," *Kansas City Star* (Kansas City), December 19, 1917.

region of Mexico, for the art of beeswax sculpting intertwines with that of the Church and shaped the Vargas family's success and impact in New Orleans. This section will demonstrate how the connection with the Church benefited the Vargas family by exploring Francisco's ethnicity and background as seen through his life experiences and the family's artworks produced during his lifetime.

Francisco's residence in Mexico City and in Puebla de los Angeles exposed him to communities noted for their wax art legacies. Though wax sculpting could be found throughout Mexico, the founding President of Latin American Art Patrons Donna McMenammin indicated a concentration of wax workers who practiced their craft in both Mexico City and Puebla.<sup>36</sup> Artists of the state of Puebla have a rich history in many styles of artworks typical to Mexico including pottery, marionettes, clay figures called *monos*, and talaveras which McMenammin described as being "exquisitely made."<sup>37</sup> The Vargas family benefited from the intricate relationship between religion and wax, for wax art gained importance during the later half of the nineteenth century due to its relationship with the concept of modernity. The relationship between wax art and modernity will be explored throughout this section.

Another source of influence for Vargas was Catholic architecture. The state of Puebla features a diverse array of architecture rooted to the Church. Catholic orders entered the New World shortly after the Europeans' arrival to the New World. The Franciscans were the first monks to arrive in Mexico in 1524 and were followed by the Dominicans in 1526, the Augustinians in 1533 and the Jesuits in 1572.<sup>38</sup> The Franciscan monastery of Huejotzingo in Puebla is known for its majestic arches and features an archivolt decorated with the Franciscan

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<sup>36</sup> Donna McMenammin, *Popular Arts in Mexico: 1850-1950* (Exton, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing Ltd, 1996), 183.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 23, 91, 115, 123, 140.

<sup>38</sup> Justino Fernández, *A Guide to Mexican Art: From its Beginnings to the Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), 54-55.

cord arranged with Romanesque-Gothic angels.<sup>39</sup> Similarly in Puebla, the Church of Acatzingo features a Franciscan cord of angels with a strong indigenous influence.<sup>40</sup> Historian of Mexican art Jusino Fernández credited the Cathedral of Puebla for setting “the tone” for classical, baroque art.<sup>41</sup> Other notable churches in the region include the Church of Huaquechula, the Church of Tecamachalco, the chapels of Tlalmanalco and the Royal Chapel of Cholula that features hemispherical domes.<sup>42</sup> Many of Francisco Vargas’ artworks featured similarities to these masterpieces such as the use of angels, indigenous depictions, and the presentation of Jesuit and Franciscan motifs.

Puebla’s affinity for religious architecture transferred to motifs suited for artisans and crafters such as those working with beeswax. In 1803, the Prussian explorer Alexander von Humboldt observed the importance of the wax artworks and that artists consumed enormous quantities of wax for use in religious festivals throughout Mexico.<sup>43</sup> These works built off of the heritage of other methods of art practiced in Mexico. European interest in wax art during the nineteenth century gave legitimacy to Francisco’s trade and opened up cultural pathways of acceptance for the family to use to their advantage. Seventeenth and eighteenth century Mexican sculptures and paintings influenced Francisco’s works. Justino Fernández explained how seventeenth century sculptures depicted figures calm and with aplomb; these features are evidenced in many of Francisco’s Catholic motifs such as his Franciscan and Jesuit monks [see illustrations 3 and 4 on ages 14 and 15].<sup>44</sup> Fernández described eighteenth century Mexican sculptures as animated and lively, features evidenced in the family’s later French Quarter figures,

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<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 56.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 66-68.

<sup>43</sup> Castellò Yturvide, *El Arte de la Cera en México* (México: Grupo Financiero Comermex, 1974) [No page numbers].

<sup>44</sup> Jesuit Priest and Franciscan Monk, accession, 1977.034.1-2a-c, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans. The two figures appear to have been mislabeled. The one labeled as a Jesuit Priest has a Franciscan knot around his waist.

which were noted for their depictions of work-related tasks. But Francisco did not limit his inspiration to sculptures and architecture, for Alonso López's *The Assumption of the Virgin* likely influenced Francisco's *The Virgin of the Assumption*.<sup>45</sup> Like López's painting of the seventeenth century, Francisco's sculpture portrayed the Virgin Mary ascending into heaven on a cloud accompanied by a multitude of angels.<sup>46</sup>



Illustration 3: A Franciscan monk (labeled as a Jesuit Priest) accession, 1977.034.2a-c, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans. The monk has a Franciscan knot around his waist

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<sup>45</sup> Unknown newspaper clipping, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>46</sup>Fernández, *A Guide to Mexican Art*, 102.



Illustration 4: A Jesuit priest (labeled as a Franciscan Monk), accession: 1977.034.1a-c, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans.

### *Customs and Technique*

The process of wax sculpting performed by the Vargas family and taught to Francisco's students followed traditional Mexican practices. According to McMenamain, the wax had to be cleaned in hot water to remove impurities from it, giving it a pure color better suited for sculpting that could then be altered by adding various ingredients such as iron oxides and zinc

white.<sup>47</sup> August Alfaro mentioned the importance of the heating element during the process of wax making. According to Alfaro, higher temperatures would darken the color of the wax, so the temperature of the heating element should not exceed 120 F.<sup>48</sup> The family practiced the mold technique and could produce about a dozen figures a day.

The mold technique served as one of a variety of ways in which one could create wax figures, but it was likely the best choice for the family for two reasons. First, it allowed multiple family members to become involved in the creation of each figure. The family members had ample opportunities to learn the processes and to learn from their mistakes. Second the mold technique offered generous opportunities for customization after the body was finished. The figures could be manipulated after coming out of the mold to create new poses. Artists hand-sewed the clothing that dressed the wax figures using fine silks and cottons to give each figure a fresh touch. A wide variety of textiles can be seen displayed on Vargas wax sculptures. The Vargas family took an extra step by dipping the cloth material into wax to change its texture and durability.

The generational continuation of wax sculpting practiced by the Vargas family was a common occurrence in art families throughout Mexico. McMEnamin stated that in all forms of arts and crafts, children would learn from their parents and pass the knowledge on to their children.<sup>49</sup> In the case of the Vargas family, the art of sculpting has seen its way to the fourth generation. Under the leadership of the patriarch, Francisco Vargas, the family acted as a team of artists based on a hierarchy of experience that determined the importance of one's jobs. The youngest and least experienced children were given simple roles, such as painting the bases of the figures; the older and more experienced members would be expected to help with the

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<sup>47</sup> McMEnamin, *Popular Arts in Mexico*, 184.

<sup>48</sup> A small pamphlet. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>49</sup> McMEnamin, *Popular Arts in Mexico*. McMEnamin's work includes many examples of families of artists.



accessories and molding. This style of teaching allowed easy access to a difficult trade, so the children could become familiar with the process.

*Latin American Catholicism: Religious Influences Expressed in Vargas Wax*

Latin American religious experts Michael J. Sallnow and William A. Christian Jr. provided a model for dividing the forms of Catholic devotion that the Iberians introduced to Latin America into four types of worship that still exist in varying degrees of remnants today: the use of holy relics, the veneration of images of saints, the worship of Mary, and the veneration of images of Christ.<sup>50</sup> While the model is not to suggest that Catholic practices remained untouched over the hundreds of years of influence, it does offer a model for examining the Mexican-Iberian ethnicity found in Puebla that influenced Francisco's life and work.

Both the use of holy relics and the veneration of images of saints appear in Francisco's works. Though not an actual relic, the skull being held by his Jesuit priest figure [see illustration 3 in appendices] hints at the importance of saintly relics in Francisco's life.<sup>51</sup> The second form of worship, concerning the veneration of saints, can also be seen in Francisco's artworks. According to Professor David L. Clawson, the venerating of images of saints held a few advantages in gaining followers over the previously introduced form of Catholic worship including the ability of images to be reproduced over and over as opposed to the availability of unique relics.<sup>52</sup> One of Francisco's surviving works likely created while in New Orleans depicts

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<sup>50</sup> Michael J. Sallnow, *Pilgrims of the Andes: Regional Cults in Cuzco*. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987) and William A. Christian Jr., *Local Religion in Sixteenth Century Spain*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981). Both of these books provide a useful approach to examine Latin American Catholicism.

<sup>51</sup> *La Biblia Sagrada*, 1824, Accession: 99-65-L, THNOC. Two four-leaf clovers were found in the family's Bible. Though not relics, it should be noted that the four-leaf clovers in a Bible could have served similar functions as religious relics in providing for luck and fortune. The Jesuit priest may be holding the skull of a saint.

<sup>52</sup> David L. Clawson, *Latin America and the Caribbean: Lands and Peoples*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2006), 218-219.

the baby Jesus being held by Saint Joseph.<sup>53</sup> This wax figure also links this second form of Catholic worship with the fourth form that will be covered later.

Continuing with the model, the third “and most rapidly expanding form of Catholic devotion,” which is described as the worship of the Virgin Mary does appear in the wax figure practice of the Vargas family.<sup>54</sup> Francisco’s *The Virgin of the Assumption* demonstrates the significance of Mary in Catholic lore as Mary is depicted ascending into Heaven with little angels encircling her as she stands upon a cloud. The quantity of these figures produced and still surviving is unknown, but a second and different depiction of Mary following the assumption theme has been located in a private collection. *The Virgin of the Assumption* remains in the possession of Francisco’s descendants.

The fourth form of Catholic devotion alluded to earlier is the veneration of images of Jesus Christ. Clawson pointed out that it is common to find in Latin American artwork images of Jesus Christ in agony and pain.<sup>55</sup> In most Catholic churches, crucifixes are displayed behind the altars and the churches are lined with the Stations of the Cross depicting Jesus’ journey up the hill to his crucifixion. The baby Jesus, another common depiction that can be seen throughout Latin America and New Orleans, can be found in some of the Vargas family’s works, including the statue of Saint Joseph.

A fifth theme left out of the model but equally important is the reverence and depiction of holy men. Some of Vargas’s surviving pieces portray Jesuit and Franciscan priests and monks. The Vargas family remained connected to the Jesuit order throughout its time in New Orleans. Francisco continued to send his children, including his daughters, to Catholic institutions of learning. Francisco had his daughter Concepcion educated at the Ursulines Convent, an order

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<sup>53</sup> Francisco Vargas, Saint Joseph Holding the Baby Jesus, ca.1880, Accession: 1990.66, THNOC.

<sup>54</sup> Clawson, *Latin America and the Caribbean*, 218.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

closely connected to the Jesuits. Even his great-grandson, August Alfaro, who continued the family trade, was a local high school sports celebrity while at Jesuit High School before enrolling at Loyola University in New Orleans, a Jesuit institute.<sup>56</sup>

*From Sacred to Secular: A Transition in Vargas Art*

As previously stated, the family crafted a variety of motifs through Francisco's lifetime including Mexican Indians and peasants, Catholic images, fruits, flowers, and French Quarter merchants. Over the years, a consistent but deliberate trend away from religious motifs towards secular themes can be found in the Vargas family's surviving works. The foundation for the family's success resulted from the ability of Francisco and his children to incorporate elements of the art learned, practiced, and perfected during the family's tenure in Puebla. For Francisco, his studies under Jesuit priests served as the backbone from which the entire family found success because of the artistic infrastructure that it provided. During the second half of the nineteenth century, wax art became attached to concepts of modernity. Wax museums such as the famed Musée Grévin became renowned for their ability to mix art, industry, and commerce.<sup>57</sup> As the world followed the Parisian culture's lead and accepted wax for its entertainment spectacle, Francisco Vargas & Sons gained popularity in New Orleans. People appreciated wax art for its ability to provide "visual realism."<sup>58</sup> For the viewers and customers of Vargas, including those at the world's fairs, Vargas art offered opportunities for people to see and experience a perceived reality that included Indians, religion, agriculture, and laborers and presented to his contemporaries opportunities for experiencing Mexico's and New Orleans's

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<sup>56</sup> *Times-Picayune* (New Orleans), February 12, 1931.

<sup>57</sup> Vanessa R. Schwartz, "Museums and Mass Spectacle: The Musée Grévin as a Monument to Modern Life," *French Historical Society*, 19, no. 1 (1995): 12.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

cultural traits. This success could not have happened without the intricate bond between the Church and art that developed in Mexico.

The family members prided themselves on their abilities to capture the daily routines of the working populations observed by them during their travels. Their figures portrayed the lives of men, women, and children. Some of the surviving figures from the Mexican genre include *Indian Hunter with Deer*, *Indian Man Selling Guitars*, *Indian Woman and Child with Roosters*, *Indian Woman Selling Flowers*, and *Indian Woman Selling Vegetables*.<sup>59</sup> The family continued to sell figures based on Mexican motifs in Texas and New Orleans. At the 1884 World's Fair, the family displayed Mexican figurines along with contracted agricultural artworks.<sup>60</sup> The Mexican figures decreased in frequency because of poor sales in New Orleans after the 1884 World's Fair and were replaced by figures more representative of New Orleans' laborers and vendors.

The Vargas family focused most of its early secular artworks on the peasants and natives of Mexico. The wife of the first Ambassador to Mexico, Fanny Calderón, wrote in her diary that the wax figures she saw in Mexico had been "brought to great perfection." She then continued by writing that "everything that surrounds them [the artists], they can imitate and their wax portraits are sometimes little gems of art."<sup>61</sup> Often these pieces captured the daily activities of the working peasants and stressed behaviors that promoted hard work. Using indigenous populations for his subjects, Francisco followed a similar pattern observed by Mrs. Calderón by depicting his figures in various acts of labor such as the peddling of flowers and vegetables. One of his pieces portrays a young Indian man carrying his kill over his shoulders; another figure is of a man selling guitars. Though the family did replace their Mexican motifs with French

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<sup>59</sup> All of these figures can be found at the Historic New Orleans Collection.

<sup>60</sup>Series of letters written to and from Vargas, 1884-1887 Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>61</sup>McMenamin, *Popular Arts in Mexico*, 183.

Quarter motifs, the same work ethic that the family portrayed in its Mexican figures would continue to be displayed in their newer and more popular designs.

Americans visiting Porfirian Mexico associated pleasure and amusement in Mexico with its natural scenery. William H. Beezley's study on the social interactions between Mexicans and Americans through recreation and sports during Porifio Díaz's reign demonstrated how Americans related the peasant life of Mexico with a primitive and natural beauty that captivated adventurers.<sup>62</sup> American travelers often perceived the peasants as backwards due to a lack of technology and saw their interaction with the rural populations that they were visiting as a clash between the industrial and the traditional.<sup>63</sup> Americans visited Mexico to encounter nature and participate in activities such as rock climbing. Americans purchasing Francisco's Mexican-themed works valued them for Francisco's ability to capture intricate details that accentuated the contrasts between the two nations. The ability for wax artists to capture such details highlighted the greater association of wax art with modernity, for Francisco's purchasers perceived the artworks as accurate depictions of the harshness of Mexican rural life and the closeness to nature related to rural work. For many, Francisco's works acted as a proxy for visiting societies out of reach.

Some of the early figures, such as the ones depicting an Indian hunter killing a deer and an Indian on horseback fighting a jaguar, merged America's fascination with Mexican nature with its Indian population by pitting man against nature. These depictions demonstrated man's violent struggle against the wild by focusing on a perceived savage culture of a primitive population that Americans found intriguing. Helen Delpar's study of the Mexican art explosion in the United States during the 1920s and 1930s revealed that Americans perceived Mexico as an

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<sup>62</sup> William H. Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club: and Other Episodes of Porfirian Mexico* (Lincoln Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press).

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

“unspoiled destination for travelers who would enjoy its quaintness, natural beauty, and artistic treasures.”<sup>64</sup> Delpar demonstrated the historical fascination Americans and Mexicans had for artworks depicting Indian cultures.<sup>65</sup> The figure portraying an Indian hunter fighting a jaguar depicted a detailed fight between a warrior and his horse against nature as the jaguar clawed deep into the horse’s body [see illustration 5]. The Indian hunter carrying a dead deer emphasized man’s ability to conquer nature. Both of these works appealed to the increasingly fascinated American population that perceived Mexico as a frontier and not as a cultural center. But, unfortunately for Francisco, such appreciation did not translate into regular sales.



Illustration 5: Indian Warrior and Jaguar, privately owned.

<sup>64</sup> Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican: Cultural Relations Between the United States and Mexico, 1920-1935* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 58.

<sup>65</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

Not all of the family's violent figures depicted the noble savage conquering the wild. The *Picador on Horseback* [see illustration 6 on page 24], accredited to one of Francisco's sons, demonstrated a different emphasis of man versus nature that could be found in Vargas' art. Mexicans appreciated different athletic feats of heroics than Americans that signified man's conquering of nature. Mexicans valued the controlled arena setting that bullfighting provided for the social values that it demonstrated. From the assigned locations of the spectators based on status to the intricate roles of the team fighting the bull, the bullfight represented Mexico's understanding of society and the need for people to comply with their duties for the purpose of national success.<sup>66</sup> But, during the Díaz regime, bullfighting, cockfighting and traditional horse competitions were either phased out or removed from cities with heavy foreign activity due to the differences in understanding of these activities between Mexicans and foreign visitors.<sup>67</sup> The meaning behind the picador performing his duty was likely lost to most American buyers of Vargas Wax.

By the late 1880s, the Vargas family completed the shift from Mexican motifs to the African-American merchants and street urchins of the French Quarter. As late as the 1980s, the family designed new figures such as second line marshals. The washerwoman, one of the family's most valued figures, was such a popular local character that even the renowned writer Lafcadio Hearn wrote an article about washerwomen stating that "it isn't their fault if they are not always angels."<sup>68</sup> At the same time, the family continued to produce the older French Quarter motifs such as the popular vegetable vendor, the praline lady, the cotton carrier, the sugar cane man, the watermelon man, and the banjo player. For many, these early figures first produced by Francisco, Adelina, and Concepcion remained highly prized additions to their collections. In a

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<sup>66</sup> Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 5, 14-17, 54, 126-127.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 16-17, 25, 29.

<sup>68</sup> Delia LaBarre, *The New Orleans of Lafcadio Hearn*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 72.

1933 issue of the *Item-Tribune*, the author wrote that the figures offered a “striking resemblance to the characters once seen frequently on the streets.”<sup>69</sup> Collectors valued the figures, for they represented the lives of the people by presenting the activities that were of social and economic importance to the city’s culture using the skills developed in Mexico.



Illustration 6: *Picador on Horse*, accession: 1992.049, Louisiana State Museum, New Orleans.

The Vargas sculptures were also prized for their detailed accessories used to highlight the daily activities of the various subjects that they portrayed. In 1939, *Coronet* stated that August Alfaro displayed “fine skills in reproducing tiny figures that are the spirit and image of colorful Negro types of the Old South.”<sup>70</sup> The 1984 Annual Conference Manual of the United Federation of Doll Clubs, Inc. stated that the Vargas figures displayed “almost unbelievable ethnic

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<sup>69</sup>*Item-Tribune* (New Orleans), March 06, 1933.

<sup>70</sup>Article clipped from *Coronet*, 1939. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.



characters” and that “quality of detail abounds” in their works.<sup>71</sup> The ability to create realistic interpretations out of wax was the quality that earned them their spots in the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in 1885, the Pan-American Exposition in 1901, and the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904.

The use of wax sculptures to depict the daily life of the people of New Orleans is reflective of the early nineteenth century “genre paintings” such as those by the German artist John Lewis Krimmel as seen in such works as *Quilting Frolic*. According to historians Davidson and Lytle, the genre painting offered to the audience a chance to view ordinary life as opposed to the depictions of the well-to-do offered by more formal paintings.<sup>72</sup> The genre painting offered an understanding of the general public that did not focus on specific heroes or grand events. The genre painting demonstrated the values that various artifacts had to a society by not simply showing what existed but by showing the importance and function of the items and filled in the gaps that artifacts alone are unable to do. Likewise, the wax figures of Vargas perform a similar function as that of the paintings of Krimmel, for these figures do not display people preparing for a formal portrait but people performing everyday activities that could have been seen on the streets of the city. Considering how often the common man is left out of history, these works of art take on an important role in piecing together the lives of the New Orleans vendors as expressed through Mexican hands. Not only do these works reflect the culture that they portray but the ethnicity of the creators, for they provide examples of aspects of daily life deemed worthy of expression by the artists that created them.

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<sup>71</sup>Article clipped from the 1984 Conference Manual of the United Federation of Doll Clubs, Inc. Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>72</sup>James West Lytle and Mark Hamilton Davidson, *After the Fact, the Art of Historical Detection, Fifth Combined Edition* (New York: Mcgraw Hill), 73-98.

In the 1880s, the public appreciated wax art for its ability to capture current events as well as genuine images of people. While the Vargas family built a reputation in regional and world's fairs, the wax museum Musée Grévin in Paris received accolades for its ability to mimic "the eclecticism of newspapers."<sup>73</sup> The public perceived wax art to be a "legitimate" reproduction of daily events, people, and objects.<sup>74</sup> The Vargas family and other wax artists entertained their patrons by demonstrating their skill at creating images as close to lifelike as possible. Like the works of Krimmel, the viewing public focused on what was captured by the artists and not what was left out. Wax artists built a reputation around the ability of wax to recreate realistic images. Vargas family members won awards for their abilities to realistically recreate fruit, flowers, and laborers. This idea legitimized their more abstract designs such as *King Cotton* and their religious motifs. Though the religious motifs were often portraying dead saints and other biblical figures, wax art recreated reality, and the Catholic city of New Orleans welcomed the recreation of religious figures seen as historical and legitimate. Though *King Cotton* was not made of wax but plaster of Paris, this thirty-foot statue portrayed an image of how Mississippi wanted its agricultural economy promoted. The five sharecroppers offering cotton to the king was the image Mississippi chose, unlike the fruit and flower recreations previously designed by the family to promote Louisiana's economy. Since the Vargas family had a reputation for recreating reality, Mississippi may have hoped that the Vargas name offered a hint of legitimacy to the image.

The family, like its patrons, perceived wax sculpting as an outlet for preserving history. Themes in the Vargas family members' artworks often reflected the individual's childhood experiences. In the *Item-Tribune* in 1933, Concepcion stated that "they [her figures] are my own

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<sup>73</sup> Schwartz, "Museums and Mass Spectacle," 13.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

ideas of the characters that I have seen on the streets since I was a girl.”<sup>75</sup> The artists attempted to recreate the world around them and create depictions that they deemed realistic and representative of daily life. The Vargas family members predicted a need to preserve the social landscapes they encountered. They understood that people perceived their art as accurate depictions of the daily lives of common workers and identified that these works could serve as history lessons. Concepcion, in the abovementioned article, demonstrated an understanding that many of the figures they depicted performed increasingly vanishing tasks. People would be able to use the family’s artworks as a collective historical window of the social and economic life of the French Quarter.

Collectors of Vargas Wax sought after figures depicting working class characters performing their daily jobs. The family understood that their clients were tourists from the Northeast and created figures that targeted this particular tourist demographic. People buying figures such as the washerwoman, the watermelon vendor, or the praline lady had many motives, and the family learned to profit from the diversity of reasons behind the tourist market [see illustration 7 on page 28]. For some, these figures depicted jobs unknown to their hometowns. For others, the black merchant life of the French Quarter may have been seen as “exotic.”<sup>76</sup> The family relied on black merchant figures and not figures depicting the white Creole and European immigrant populations that existed in New Orleans. The family understood its choice of subjects and motifs as a business decision; thus, Vargas Wax arts reflect a constant negotiation by the family with its clientele.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> *Item-Tribune* (New Orleans), March 06, 1933.

<sup>76</sup> Jan Nederveen Pieterse, *White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press). Pieterse’s examination of mammy, sambo, and other images of blacks in commercial art and advertising examines potential racist tension in artworks similar to Vargas Wax.

<sup>77</sup> James Smalls, ““Race” as Spectacle in Late-Nineteenth Century French Art and Popular Culture,” *French Historical Studies*, 26, no. 2 (2003): 351-382. Though this work does not examine racial and social aspects of Vargas art in terms of tourism, James Smalls offers insight into the relationship between art, racism, and modernity.



Illustration 7: Unlabeled figure, unmarked box, The Latin American Library, Tulane, New Orleans, Louisiana. .  
This figure has been identified by a surviving family member as being a Vargas wax figure. She is selling pralines.

*Connecting New Orleans to Mexico: A Transnational Historical Review*

In *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, Helen Delpar stated that a fertile environment for cultural relations between Mexico and the United States did not exist before 1920.<sup>78</sup> Delpar argued that 900,000 immigrants and migrants that crossed the border between 1910 and 1920 allowed for such an environment to develop by increasing the frequency of cultural exchange that previously remained limited to that of the elites.<sup>79</sup> According to Delpar, Americans previously found interest in Mexico's natural scenery. Americans did not have access to Mexican arts or literature translations, but they did find the Porfiriato a time for safe travel.<sup>80</sup> The artistic disconnect between Mexico and United States revealed Porfirian Mexico's orientation towards Latin Europe. Delpar stated that the intellectual Mexicans viewed Americans as "vulgar materialists" and looked towards France and Spain where they, in turn, exported their art and artists to Paris and Madrid.<sup>81</sup> William H. Beezley's examination of sports in Porfirian Mexico demonstrated the Mexican elites' admiration of Parisian culture. Under Díaz, the notorious Jockey Club never again hosted a *charreada* after one Parisian visitor offered negative remarks about the entire event.<sup>82</sup> Díaz went to great lengths to hide bullfights and cockfights out of the sight of Europeans by limiting them to areas without large amounts of tourists. Neither the United States citizens nor Mexican elites made great efforts to recognize the others' cultural achievements.

Francisco Vargas's tenure in the United States preceded by several decades the period that Delpar described as the apex of Mexican cultural interest in the United States. New

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<sup>78</sup> Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican*, ix. Terms such as the Porfiriato refer to the era of Mexican history when General Porfirio Díaz ruled Mexico as president, an era that spanned four decades (roughly the same years that Vargas spent in New Orleans).

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-3.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 3-5.

<sup>82</sup> Beezley, *Judas at the Jockey Club*, 7.

Orleans's strong Catholic ties and connections to French and Spanish speaking people created a culturally accommodating atmosphere that accepted Mexicans, their politics, their customs, and their art.<sup>83</sup> Francisco's relationship with the Jesuits allowed for connections and exposure with Creoles, Confederates, the Church, and prominent Southern and Mexican politicians. These connections existed because of a greater ambitious design by Napoleon III, Maximilian, and Mexican and Americans leaders working together to create ties relating to a newly defined Latin America.<sup>84</sup> Napoleon's Latin America incorporated strong Church ties with designs for a new world system meant to connect France with the people of the Romance languages in the New World. By the 1860s, this included parts of Texas and Louisiana in the minds of many of these leaders. Francisco benefited from both the associations surrounding the French Intervention as well as an older legacy of Latin American people appreciating French cultural ideas that included an admiration of wax art. The following section will demonstrate the cultural exposure and migrations that swept through Mexico, Texas, and Louisiana that allowed for Francisco's success in New Orleans.

Before the Civil War, some families of Creoles of Color left New Orleans for Mexico, founding their own settlement just south of Tampico called the Eureka Colony.<sup>85</sup> The Eureka Colony served as an agricultural cooperative. Although the cooperative failed and burned down around 1862, many former Louisiana families remained in the area.<sup>86</sup> One of the most prominent

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<sup>83</sup> Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon, *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992). *Creole New Orleans* provides great background for studying the relationship between the idea of a creole citizen and the Spanish and French connections that have left a Latin legacy in the city.

<sup>84</sup> Alfred Jackson Hanna and Kathryn Abbey Hanna, *Napoleon III and Mexico: American Triumph over Monarchy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1971) and Blair Niles, *Passengers to Mexico: The Last Invasion of the Americas* (New York: Farrar & Rhinehard, Inc., 1943). Both of these books reveal an intricate weaving of the people of France, Mexico and the U.S. South.

<sup>85</sup> Mary Niall Mitchell, *Raising Freedom's Child: Black Children and Visions of the Future after Slavery* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 29-35.

<sup>86</sup> Charles E. Kinzer, "The Ties of New Orleans and Their Pedagogical Influence on the Early Jazz Clarinet Style," *Black Music Research Journal*, vol. 16 (Fall 1996): 280.

families of early jazz, the Tios, has ancestral roots that connect New Orleans to the Eureka Colony. The Tio family, much like the Vargas family, can be treated as a family unit that found success in perpetuating artistic talents to achieve status and economic stability. Unlike the Vargas family, the Tio family's heritage held roots to New Orleans older than the roots of Mexico. But both families utilized Mexican cultural elements while influencing their respective artistic fields in New Orleans.<sup>87</sup>

But the Eureka Colony was not the only migration of Louisiana citizens into that region of Mexico during the War of Reform and French Intervention. During the Civil War, as Confederates continued to lose the war, many, including Louisiana's Governor Henry Watkins Allen, fled to Monterrey. Many dispersed to Tampico or to the Carlotta Colony. In particular, Gov. Allen started a prominent English newspaper in Mexico City during the French intervention and promoted further immigration into the region by New Orleans residents. Allen promoted the beauty of the land, but warned the Confederates not to come without enough money to withstand the initial move to the region.

Puebla's and Mexico City's location in relationship to Vera Cruz also meant that Vargas' home region experienced additional exposure to New Orleans business. Gene W. Boyett demonstrated the complex relationship between the two regions' businesses vis-à-vis the ports throughout the Gulf of Mexico.<sup>88</sup> Famines, the Mexican War and international price wars benefited New Orleans. During the 1840s, canals and railroads began to detract business from New Orleans' ports despite the generally held belief by many in the region that its strategic location's potential for prosperity ensured success for businessmen of the region.<sup>89</sup> During the

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 279-302.

<sup>88</sup> Gene W. Boyett. "Money and Maritime Activities in New Orleans During the Mexican War." *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association*, vol. 17, no.4 (1976): 413-429.

<sup>89</sup>Ibid., 414.

Mexican-American War, New Orleans also served as a military port, for 3,000 troops departed from the Crescent City to Vera Cruz in the first week of July of 1847; after the departure, the city's port supplied the soldiers in the region.<sup>90</sup>

During Francisco's adulthood, political unrest remained a pressing concern in Mexico, especially in the region surrounding Puebla and Mexico City. The outbreaks of violence and government instability that occurred throughout his life led to increased Mexican migration into New Orleans. Mexico experienced a long war against Indian populations in its northern region from the onset of its independence. Instability in the government at the federal level and large international debts plagued the nation throughout its early history. In 1838, the French invaded Mexico for the first time in what is known as the Pastry War, a war that gave Antonio López de Santa Anna fame. Santa Anna further participated in the war against Texas and the Mexican-American War. He later gained power in Mexico in 1853 after an army revolt. During this period, Juan Álvarez led the Revolution of Ayutla, which removed Santa Anna from power but led to federal instability and the need for a new constitution.<sup>91</sup> This revolution resulted in the previously discussed War of Reform, the French Intervention, and the eventual execution of Emperor Maximilian in the 1850s and 1860s.

Though Francisco Vargas shielded his children from the horrors of these wars as best he could, the campaigns against his two cities, Puebla de los Angeles and Mexico City, left the family affected by the drastic changes, both positively and negatively. Under the eager and ambitious new emperor, French scientists and geographers established camp in Mexico and proceeded to map the nation in order to extract resources and sell land to Americans such as the

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<sup>90</sup>Ibid., 426.

<sup>91</sup> Justo Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, trans. Charles Ramsdell (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1969), 266-273.



infamous Duke of Sonora from Mississippi.<sup>92</sup> Though Maximilian had a reputation for love of Mexican culture, French and Austrian arts infiltrated the capital, and some of these arts were taught to Concepcion. More importantly for the future of the Vargas family's legacy, the Jesuits found the new empire friendly to their cause and returned to work in their missions. Francisco certainly worked on his craft under the Jesuits sometime during this time, though it is possible that he did not begin until the Second Mexican Empire formed under Maximilian due to the Reformers hostility towards the Jesuits. The family learned to extract the positive elements from a volatile and unstable world, an educational experience that the family utilized to its full advantage. No matter where it went or how unstable the location, the family learned to maximize its time by diminishing the negative elements that threatened most Mexicans. Outside of the weather, the family members never mentioned negative aspects of their journeys.

French high society influenced the art movement during Maximilian's rule as emperor. As mentioned, Francisco enrolled Concepcion from an early age in a school in Mexico City where she learned oil painting, water colors, crayon, and mother of pearl.<sup>93</sup> The similarities between Princess Mathilde Bonaparte's private collection as well as her personal exhibitions of her watercolors between 1859 and 1867 to that of the art that Concepcion learned demonstrates the extent of French high culture on Mexico City during Maximilian's occupation.<sup>94</sup> It was during this time period that her father, Francisco, finalized his studies with the Jesuits.<sup>95</sup> The Jesuits would not have been able to teach the art of beeswax sculpting during this period without the support of Napoleon III and Maximilian.

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<sup>92</sup> Hanna and Hanna, *Napoleon III and Mexico*, 181.

<sup>93</sup>“Only One Sculptress Here Carries Out Father's Work, Honors have Come to Both,” newspaper clipping, circa 1910, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

<sup>94</sup> Philadelphia Museum of Art, *The Second Empire, 1852-1870: Art in France under Napoleon III* (Paris: Wayne State University Press, 1978), 12.

<sup>95</sup> Mahe, *Encyclopaedia of New Orleans Artists*, 391-392.

But the wars also took their toll on Mexico and the Vargas family. As the possibility of a Confederate victory in the United States decreased, so did Napoleon III's military and financial support of the Second Mexican Empire. By 1867, the new empire was void of French aid; Maximilian was captured and executed later that year.<sup>96</sup> In 1868, the Reform leaders, under Juarez, reclaimed the capital and continued their attack on the Jesuits. As a result of the continuous social upheaval in the family's two prominent places of residence, Mexico City and Puebla de los Angeles, the family migrated towards Texas and entered the United States around 1870.

There are a number of possibilities as to why the family did not evacuate Mexico from the prominent port city of Vera Cruz. Though the family certainly had relatives in Texas in later years and members did return there from time to time, it is possible that relatives lived there before their initial exodus. But Vera Cruz would still have been the safer route; Vera Cruz's port could have still brought them to Galveston, a town the family would eventually reside in. Concepcion's grandson, August Alfaro, claimed that the family traveled on a covered wagon, so it is possible that boat was simply less efficient for the transportation of their art material. Sometime during this journey, Concepcion's half-sister Adelina was born. The family finally reached Texas in 1870. Though the motives remain speculative, their route to El Paso passed through the areas with sizeable Confederate populations, and their route would have been a route that many prominent Confederates would have used after the end of the Civil War. The family had more than a vague understanding of the people they would soon live with in their new home.

The family's stay in Texas lasted for four years and included the cities of El Paso, San Antonio, and Galveston. The significance of the locations that the Vargas family moved to should not be underestimated, for they moved to a state known for strong Hispanic-Anglo

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<sup>96</sup> Sierra, *The Political Evolution of the Mexican People*, 339-341.

friction. Throughout the entire Southwest, the lynching of Mexicans was a common occurrence. Due to the lingering memories of the Texas-Mexican War and the Mexican-American War, Texans were increasingly hostile to the perceived invaders while ignoring the historical connections Mexicans had with the region. Mexicans were perceived as a degenerate race due to their habitual mixing of blood that created inferior mixed offspring in the minds of many Texans. During this era, the mixing of blood was perceived to draw out the worst characteristics of both races into the child; thus, miscegenation was deeply frowned upon.<sup>97</sup> Being that Mexicans, since their independence, had taken great strides in promoting their *mestizo* heritage by removing the colonial caste system and doing away with color labels, Anglo-Texans had found continual fuel to the fire.<sup>98</sup> A concentration of anti-Mexican lynching occurred in Central Texas during this period. But the family always settled in regions that tolerated Mexican settlement. By sticking to El Paso, San Antonio, and Galveston, Francisco found a support system for his children that shielded them from the blunt of Anglo racism against the Mexican population, such as the Spanish church in San Antonio that provided the family with work. Despite the racism against *mestizo* blood, all of the family members learned to create art works depicting Mexican Indian heritage, a practice that Concepcion's grandchild August would continue. No accounts survive of them ever speaking negatively about their stay in Texas other than a bad storm in Galveston that inspired the family's *Virgin of the Assumption* and the return of at least one member to Texas in later years suggests that their experience there was pleasant.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> William D. Carrigan, *The Making of a Lynching Culture: Violence and Vigilantism in Central Texas, 1836-1916* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2004). Carrigan's study on the topic of lynching in Central Texas illuminates upon the cultural, social, historical, and psychological factors that contributed to the intense violence in this region.

<sup>98</sup>Independent Mexico did not officially recognize race. Many of the key Mexican leaders such as Hidalgo, Juarez, and Díaz had *mestizo* backgrounds.

<sup>99</sup> Unknown newspaper clipping, Artist Files: Vargas, Francisco, THNOC.

New Orleans allowed Francisco to maintain his heritage while acclimating with his new neighbors. In 1893, Francisco held a party celebrating the proclamation of the declaration of Mexican liberty from Spain. This party featured a speech by Mexican Consul Manuel Zamora and hosted many successful men of New Orleans such as F. Ramos.<sup>100</sup> The local media depicted this gathering with pro-Mexican attitudes that positively emphasized Vargas' Mexican heritage. Vargas also had contact with Porfirio Díaz. Díaz once fled to New Orleans as an exile. Díaz acted as the chief commissioner of the Mexican government to the New Orleans Exposition in 1884.<sup>101</sup> Later, Díaz purchased figurines from Vargas.<sup>102</sup> Many exiled Mexican politicians discovered nineteenth century New Orleans as a hospitable location for their plotting and planning, including the future minister of foreign affairs Melchor Ocampo, future president Benito Juárez, Ponciano Arriaga, José Maria Mata, Manuel Cepeda Perana, Juan Bautista Ceballos and Ignacio Comonfort.<sup>103</sup> Mexicans could eagerly meet people friendly to their causes in New Orleans. Francisco's heritage did not hinder his ability to make similar connections.

Though Francisco died in 1915, his family continued the craft. The family produced over 150 models of figurines, the bulk while Francisco lived. Francisco's death represented a change in the family's leadership, for Concepcion, her daughter, Lucy Rosado, and Concepcion's grandson, August Alfaro, continued the trade. Today, Vargas artworks remain an attractive collectible that still appear in art auctions and internet websites, selling for hundreds of dollars. Though subtle, the Vargas family of Mexico left their mark not just on New Orleans but the entire state of Louisiana and the Gulf South. Their actions, artworks, friendships and travels reveal a new outlet for studying the intricate relationship between the Gulf South and Mexico.

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<sup>100</sup> *Daily Picayune* (New Orleans), September 17, 1893.

<sup>101</sup> Gene Yeager, "Profirian Commercial Propaganda: Mexico in the World Industrial Expositions," *The Americas*, vol. 34, no.2 (1977): 235.

<sup>102</sup> "When Porfio Díaz Visited New Orleans," *Daily Picayune (New Orleans)*, 18, June 1911, p. 8.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

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