



2021.19
Unidentified artist, Caracas
Ex voto with Saints
1752
Oil on panel
20 ¼ x 13 1/8 in.

This rather humble painting on panel was created for Don Agustín de Torres, Lieutenant Colonel in the Spanish Royal Army, while he was stationed in Caracas in 1752. At its center stands Our Lady of the Pillar of Zaragoza holding the Christ Child in her arms. While much of the pillar is obscured by a roundel holding St. Michael, the base bears the Trinitarian cross typically associated with this iconography. Kneeling at the Virgin's feet and gazing reverently upward is St. Joseph in a purple tunic. Flanking the central scene are four additional roundels bearing male saints. The two figures on the top left and right cannot be definitively identified, though one holds the palm of a martyr and the other a book and quill, suggesting a position as a Doctor of the Church or prominent theologian. At the bottom left is the Franciscan friar, St. Anthony of Padua (1195-1231), holding the Christ Child in his arms. To his right stands the Jesuit martyr St.

John Nepomuk (c. 1345-1393) recognizable by the stars ringing his head. Presiding over the scene from Heaven are God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

On the reverse of the panel is an inscription indicating that it was created in 1752 for Lieutenant Colonel Don Agustín de Torres.

A° de 1752. En nombre de la Capilla de los S Angeles q se venera en la iglesia de la SS^{ma} Ttrinidad, en Caracas se le ofresio al S^r Ttheniente Coronel Dn Agustín de Ttores estta lamina.

This clarifies the poem, written on a banderole on the front of the panel, that appears to have been written explicitly for the ex voto and makes several allusions to Torres:

“El soberano Miguel
Contra el diablo león feroz
De su coronel que es Dios
Es teniente coronel
Contra vos, Agustín fiel
Y el enemigo no corre
Pues la trinidad socorre
Vuestra torre con presteza
Y al que es torre en fortaleza
Da fortaleza de torre”

The sovereign Michael
Against the devil, ferocious lion
From his colonel who is God
Is lieutenant colonel
Against you, faithful Augustine
And the Enemy [devil] does not run
For the Trinity aids
Your tower with alacrity
And that who is an enduring tower
Gives strength of a tower

The poem begins by referencing the archangel Michael’s vanquishing of Satan in the war in heaven, under the direction of his colonel, God (Revelation 12:7-9). It likens Agustín de Torres to St. Michael, God’s lieutenant colonel, and declares that, with the aid of the Trinity on his side, his enemies will likewise be subdued. The conclusion of the poem plays on the name “Torres” (“towers”) and the image of the tower as a pillar of strength.

Little is known of Torres’ life and activity in Venezuela from the documentary record, including the presumably valorous acts for which this ex voto was commissioned. Torres was a peninsular, born in the village of Consuegra in the province of Toledo.¹ In 1736, he married María Engracia del Valle, a native of Madrid and possibly an extended relative, in Ceuta. It is unclear at what point Torres was stationed in Caracas, though his wife and two children arrived

Commented [KS1]: Divine strength?

¹ Archivo Militar de Segovia, Legajo 1158, Expediente 35, “Doña Engracia del Valle (viuda Agustín de Torres),” n.p.

from Spain in 1753 along with a company of servants.² The couple remained in Caracas until at least 1758, when Torres authored a will stating that he was a resident of the city. By the next year, the family had relocated to Cadiz where their fifth and final child was born. That same year, 1759, Torres was named a Colonel of the Regiment of Asturias by Charles III. He died in 1762 in Jumilla, Spain due to “a misfortune originating from insanity” that prevented him from receiving the Last Rites.³

The inscription on the reverse specifies that the work was offered to Torres in the name of the Chapel of the Holy Angels at the Church of la Santísima Trinidad in Caracas. Construction on la Santísima Trinidad began in 1746 and was overseen by the architect Juan Domingo del Sacramento Infante, who died before its inauguration in 1781 and completion in 1783.⁴ Juan Vicente Bolívar y Ponte, father of Simón Bolívar, helped fund the construction and young Simón later received his baptism and first communion there. In March 1812, the church was destroyed by an earthquake that struck Caracas, and for several decades lay in ruins (fig. 1). In the late 19th century, the National Pantheon was erected on the site where la Santísima Trinidad lay.

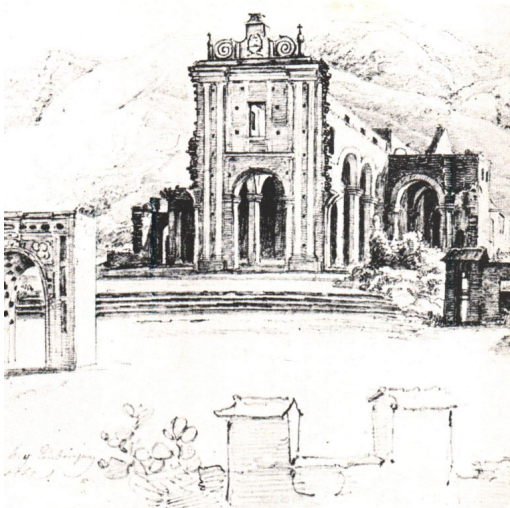


Fig. 1 Ferdinand Bellermann (1814-1889), *Ruinas de la iglesia de la Santísima Trinidad en Caracas*, c. 1842-45. Galería de Arte Nacional, Caracas.

During his pastoral visit of Venezuela in 1772, Bishop Mariano Martí had the (partially constructed) church inventoried and the Chapel of the Angels was described thusly:

² Archivo General de Indias, Contratación,5495,N.1,R.56

³ “una desgracia originada de demencia” in Archivo Militar de Segovia, Legajo 1158, Expediente 35, “Doña Engracia del Valle (viuda Agustín de Torres), n.p. “Demencia” could also be translated as dementia.

⁴ On the history of the church, see Arístedes Rojas, *Leyendas históricas de Venezuela*. (Caracas: Imprenta de la Patria, 1890; Caracas: Los libros de El Nacional, 1999), 40-62. Citations refer to the reprint edition.

“En ella se halla un retablo de madera grande, de dos cuerpos sin dorar con ocho ángeles, los seis grandes que le adornan en forma de columnas, y los dos pequeños de copete, tiene seis nichos, tres arriba y tres abajo en aquellos las imágenes de San Miguel y San Gabriel, de talla y en los dos de abajo las de San Rafael y el Santo Angel de la Guarda de pintura en cuadro, con otras imágenes de Nuestra Señora de los Remedios y de la Luz, tiene su sagrario vacío, mesa y credencias de madera, ara, crucifijo y un mantel, se le mandaron poner tres.”⁵

Of the angels and saints that adorned this chapel, only Saint Michael appears directly in the ex voto, suggesting that the other saints may have been chosen to reflect Torres’ devotional preferences. Alternatively, the small size of the text relative to the banderole might suggest that the work was created for the art market and simply customized with the added inscription.

While the use of panel as a painting surface was not common elsewhere in South America during the 18th century, it was widely used in Venezuela, particularly in popular art.⁶ The use of the term “lámina” to describe the work in the inscription is also worth noting; according to Miguel de Covarrubias (1611), the term indicated a sheet of metal such as gold or silver; by the time of the *Diccionario de Autoridades* (1734), the term had been expanded to: “plancha de metal de diversas figuras y tamaños, en la qual se suele esculpir una cosa.”⁷ While neither of these definitions accounts for the use of *lámina* to describe painting, it often was, as in an inscription on another work (1997.011) in the Thoma Collection in which an inscription notes “Se pinto esta lamina en 1771.”

⁵ Mariano Martí, *Documentos relativos a su visita pastoral de la diócesis de Caracas (1771-1784)*, vol. 3 (Caracas: Biblioteca de la Academia Nacional de la Historia, 1969), 195.

⁶ Janeth Rodríguez Nobrega, personal communication, August 2021. See Carlos F. Duarte, *Pintura e Iconografía Popular de Venezuela* (Caracas: Armitano, 1978).

⁷ Sebastián de Covarrubias, *Tesoro de la lengua castellana o española* (Madrid: Luis Sánchez, 1611), 1025; *Diccionario de la lengua castellana en que se explica el verdadero sentido de las voces, su naturaleza, y calidad* [...], vol. 4 (Madrid: Imprenta de la Real Academia Española, por los herederos de Francisco de Hierro, 1734), 354.