



2020.83

Juan Pedro López (1724-1787)

Our Lady of Guidance

Caracas, Venezuela

c. 1765-70

Oil on canvas, 41.325 x 26.5 in.

According to pious tradition, in 1688, while sailing from Veracruz, Mexico to Maracaibo, Venezuela, captain Juan Delgado and his crew became lost after evading some enemy ships with the aid of Saint Rita, to whom they had appealed for succor. While trying to orient themselves, they discovered a box floating in the sea with a statue of Our Lady of Guidance inside it. Delgado and his men prayed that the statue would bring them safe harbor, which it did. After their arrival in the port of La Guaira, the statue was duly rendered to the bishop of Caracas, Don Diego de Baños y Sotomayor (1637-1706). The statue was placed at the Church of San Mauricio

in Caracas, where it became the patroness of one of Black confraternities founded in 1704 by “morenos libres de la nación Tari.”¹



Fig. 1 *Our Lady of Caracas*, 1766. Collection of the Concejo Municipal de Caracas. The tower of San Mauricio is visible to the left of the Cathedral in the main plaza of the city.

San Mauricio was originally constructed as an unpretentious hermitage dedicated to Saint Sebastian shortly after the establishment of Caracas by the conquistador Diego de Losada (1511-1569). Losada erected it in thanks for surviving a barrage of poison-tipped arrows from indigenous combatants in 1567 during the conquest of Venezuela.² When the nearby hermitage dedicated to Saint Maurice, the martyred Egyptian military leader of the Theban Legion of Rome, burned to the ground in 1569, the two hermitages were combined and the name San Mauricio eventually won out in the popular imagination.³ In part due to the arrival of the image of Our Lady of Guidance in the 18th century, San Mauricio was rebuilt from a humble wood and thatch hut into a three-naved brick building with a three-story belltower (fig. 1). The Virgin was housed in a niche in the middle of the *retablo*, flanked by the images of Saints Maurice and Sebastian. San Mauricio was finally demolished in the late 19th century and replaced by the

¹ For more on this confraternity see Emilia Troconis de Veracoechea, “Tres Cofradías de negros en la Iglesia de San Mauricio de Caracas,” *Montalbán* 4 (1976): 339-376 and Andreina Soto, “Purchasing the Status: Religious Confraternities in Late-Colonial Venezuela” *CONCEPT* 39 (2016): 1-24.

² Francisco Pérez, “De la ermita de San Sebastián a la iglesia de San Mauricio: Primer asentamiento católico de la Caracas colonial” *Historia y patrimonio* 15 (2011): 1-2. The history of this episode is recounted in José de Oviedo y Baños’ *Historia y conquista de la población de la provincial de Venezuela* (Madrid: en la Imprenta de D. Gregorio de Hermosilla, 1723), 241-42.

³ Pérez, op. cit., 5-7.

church of the Santa Capilla, where the statue of Our Lady of Guidance resides today in an altar to the left of the narthex.

The Thoma painting shows Our Lady of Guidance standing in her niche in the main altar of San Mauricio as two putti lean down to crown her. In her left hand she holds a scepter, and in her right stands the Christ Child, dressed like an eighteenth-century dandy in a red silk suit embroidered with gilt thread. The painting was created by Juan Pedro López, the most renowned painter of eighteenth-century Venezuela. López's frequent collaborator, the cabinetmaker (*ebanista*), Domingo Gutiérrez, was responsible for the elaborate gilt rococo frame surrounding the work. Local legend suggests that the faces of the Virgin and Child in the Thoma painting were modeled on those of the wife and child of the first count of Tovar, Martín de Tovar y Blanco (1726-1811), who had a particular devotion to the image.⁴ Devotion to Our Lady of Guidance was particularly popular around the middle of the 18th century when López created this work.⁵ The Thoma painting is not the only version of Our Lady of Guidance produced by López; now in the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, is a slightly earlier version thought to have been commissioned for the convent of Discalced Carmelites in Caracas (fig. 2).⁶ Both versions render the Virgin in the same blue and gold robes adorned with pink roses, but the Boston version is more impressionistic in its depiction of the fabric. The crown and *rostrillo* of the Virgin are also different, with the Thoma version being more exacting in its representation of the gems embedded in the ornaments.⁷ The relatively planar faces of the Virgin in both paintings share a strong resemblance with their wide, rounded eyes and small, pink mouths, both hallmarks of López's work, but the Thoma painting is somewhat more lifelike.

⁴ Charles III bestowed this title on Martín de Tovar on July 4, 1771. Tovar's wife María Manuela de Ponte y Mijáres de Solórzano was also a member of Venezuela's creole elite. If the legend has any merit, the Christ Child in the painting might represent the couple's eldest son Domingo José de Tovar y Ponte, born August 3, 1762. The suggestion is made slightly more plausible given that López acted, on various occasions, as an appraiser for the estates of Martín de Tovar's father, José Manuel de Tovar y Galindo, and his aunt, Ana Teresa de Tovar y Galindo. See Carlos F. Duarte, *Diccionario biográfico documental. Pintores, escultores y doradores en Venezuela. Período hispánico y comienzos del período republicano* (Caracas: Fundación Galería de Arte Nacional, Fundación Polar, 2000), 141, 164.

⁵ Alfredo Boulton, *Historia de la pintura en Venezuela*, vol. 1 *Epoca colonial* (Caracas: Editorial Arte, 1964), 115.

⁶ See Carlos F. Duarte, *Juan Pedro López: maestro de pintor, escultor y dorador 1724-1787* (Caracas: Fundación Polar and Galería de Arte Nacional, 1996), 106-7.

⁷ In an inventory made of San Mauricio in 1772, the crown and scepter of the Virgin were described as being made of silver gilt embedded with forty-one stones both precious and imitation, primarily emeralds and amethysts. The *rostrillo* was made of gold and studded with forty-five emeralds and a further twenty-two imitation stones of green and white. Neither of the two paintings depicts the stones as green, which may be due to discoloration of pigments over time. See 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), 65. The Thoma painting displays evidence of blue pigments in the stones surrounding the *rostrillo*, but further analysis will be required to determine if any yellow pigment might have been present.



Fig. 2 Juan Pedro López, *Our Lady of Guidance*, about 1762, oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2019.1993. Gift of Patricia Phelps de Cisneros.

López was born in Caracas on June 23, 1724 to *isleños*, that is to say parents from the Canary Islands.⁸ Little is known of López's artistic training, though several prominent artists were associated with his family, including the painter Fernando Alvarez Carneiro (c. 1670-1744) and his son Pedro Juan Alvarez Carneiro, with whom he later worked. In 1750, López married Juana Antonia de la Cruz Delgado, also from Tenerife, with whom he had twelve children. He produced his first artwork in 1751 at age 27, a painting of the *Baptism of Christ* for the baptistery of the Church of La Candelaria in Caracas (now lost).⁹ The following year, the confraternity of Our Lady of Guidance contracted him to produce a series of sixteen paintings depicting the life of the Virgin Mary for San Mauricio.¹⁰ López was tremendously prolific throughout his artistic career. More than 200 works are attributed to him, though López signed only three. In addition

⁸ While Caracas had a tiny population of roughly 7,000 in the 18th century, more than a quarter of its creole population was of *isleño* extraction.

⁹ Duarte, *Juan Pedro López*, 69.

¹⁰ For this labor, López received 207 pesos from the confraternity. Thirteen of these works are now at the Church of San Francisco and two are in private collections. See Duarte, *Diccionario*, 140 and *Juan Pedro López*, 69-77.

to working as a painter, López also created sculpture and ornamental decoration, refreshed and repaired artworks, gilded frames and *retablos*, and appraised estates.

López operated in the rococo style, which arrived to Venezuela in the 1760s and was propagated in large part by Domingo Gutiérrez.¹¹ The palette López employed features the crimsons, blues, ochres, and gray whites popular with other 18th-century painters. López's style has often been compared to that of Miguel Cabrera (1695-1768) – and it has been suggested that López may have journeyed to Mexico during his lifetime to study with artists working in the style of Cabrera.¹² However, there were also several works by Cabrera that arrived to Caracas via trade with Mexico, and it is more likely that López was influenced by the influx of artistic works from Spain, the Canaries, and Mexico into the port of La Guaira.¹³

López remained productive even into his later years and died on August 15, 1787 at age 63 in his home in the Altigracia parish of Caracas. His body was interred at the convent church of La Merced near his home, survived by his wife and seven of his children. While López had many followers and imitators, it is less certain if he trained any apprentices during his career.

Domingo Gutiérrez (1709-1793) was born in La Laguna, Tenerife and arrived in Caracas sometime prior to 1730, when he wed another *tinerfeña*, Clara Joefa Oropeza Leal.¹⁴ Gutiérrez and López were not only frequent collaborators, but evidently also good friends, with Gutiérrez acting as a witness at López's wedding in 1750.¹⁵ López and Gutiérrez began to collaborate around 1755 and soon Gutiérrez was producing all of the frames and strainers for López's paintings.¹⁶ During his career as a furniture-maker and carver, Gutiérrez created *retablos* for many religious institutions in and around Caracas, among them the Iglesia del Dulce Nombre de Jesús in Petare, the Church in the village of Santa Lucía, Iglesia de San Francisco, Caracas, and Cathedral of Caracas.

Like López, Gutiérrez had connections to the confraternity of Nuestra Señora de Guía at San Mauricio. He was a *cofrade* (member) of that confraternity – along with several others, and it is possible that he lavished particular care on this extraordinary frame out of devotion to the Virgin.¹⁷ Several areas of the frame are not gilded, suggesting that he may have cut down and refashioned an existing piece of furniture.

¹¹ Carlos F. Duarte, "Domingo Gutiérrez, el maestro del rococó en Venezuela," *Anuario de Estudios Atlánticos* 22 (1976): 333.

¹² Carlos F. Duarte, "Cinco obras del pintor caraqueño Juan Pedro López en Canarias," *Anales del Museo de América* 5 (1997): 176.

¹³ See Carlos Duarte, *Catálogo de obras artísticas mexicanas en Venezuela* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas, 1998) and Mónica Domínguez Torres, "Una vision frustrada? Un lienzo de Miguel Cabrera y la residencia jesuita en la Maracaibo colonial" *Anales del Instituto de Investigaciones Estéticas* 90 (2007): 177-188.

¹⁴ Carlos F. Duarte, *Domingo Gutiérrez: el maestro del rococó en Venezuela* (Caracas: Ediciones Equinoccio. Universidad Simón Bolívar, 1977), 14.

¹⁵ Duarte, *Juan Pedro López*, 32.

¹⁶ Duarte, *Domingo Gutiérrez*, 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 15.



CARL & MARILYNN THOMA FOUNDATION

1925 Cedar Springs Rd, Suite 205 | Dallas, TX 75201 | 214.971.7770 | thomafoundation.org