

Eliab/Elijah Metcalf

(Franklin, Massachusetts, 1785 – New York or Havana, 1834)

Portrait of Don Miguel de la Torre y Pando

Oil on canvas, 230 x 162 cm. Signed and dated in 1826.

[Inscription on the paper]

To His Excellency, Sir Miguel de la Torre,

Knight of the Grand Cross,

Of the Royal Orders of America, Isabella the Catholic Queen and Saint Ferdinand,

Of the fourth class of this final one

Decorated with several crosses of merit for different battles

Lieutenant General of the Crown's Armies.

*Governor and Captain General of the Island of San Juan Bautista
de Puerto Rico etc.*

For the tact with which he proceeded to reinstate His Majesty's Government in all its sovereignty:

For the endeavour with which he sought to keep the Island secure:

For the vigilance with which he managed to keep his foreign enemies at bay:

For his ardour in the destruction of pirates and wrongdoers:

For his special care in upholding peace and harmony among the population:

For his wise and apposite measures in favour of trade and agriculture

*For his public works in Theatre, Highways, Bridges, Canals, Churches and King's Houses:
with which he beautified the Capital and many towns in the Province:*

*For the trust he managed to inspire during his time in office, whereby there was not the slightest manifestation
of any disturbance, quarrel or ignominy whatsoever, bringing everyone together as a single family:*

For managing to keep the courts empty, appeasing any political conflict and resolving lawsuits even before they had been heard.

*For the success with which he helped to implement the arrangement of the administration of the Royal Treasury by
significantly increasing its revenue and filling the public coffers.*

For the military organisation he applied to the Island.

For his allegiance to the King, our Lord.

His probity, disinterest, and fair, impartial and honest judgement.

*For all these virtues, and eminent qualities, together with those he manifested in the
Peninsular campaigns against the European Tyrant, and in Costa Firme¹,*

combating the King's enemies, in which he manifested

his courage, skill, prudence and knowledge.

He is offered this small token of gratitude.

*The City Council of the Capital of the Island of
Puerto Rico.*

On 31st December 1826.

[On the edge of the paper]

Metcalf.

Pinxt.

¹ Northern Venezuela and Colombia, and the southern part of Central America

This portrait was part of the decoration of the chapter house at the city hall in San Juan de Puerto Rico. In 1826, the municipal council commissioned the US artist Eliab Metcalf (1785-1834) to paint a portrait of the governor, lieutenant general Miguel de la Torre y Pando (1786-1843), in recognition of his good governance during his first years in office.ⁱ At a critical time in the history of Puerto Rico, linked to the metropolis by ties that were becoming increasingly questioned, the King and his foremost representative in those lands were the last hope for the city council of San Juan and the island's Creole elite, who looked warily upon the spread of the independence movement throughout the continent and the annexationist intentions expressed by Great Britain and the United States.ⁱⁱ According to the account related by Pedro Tomás de Córdoba, secretary and admirer of the general, who hailed from the Basque province of Bizkaia, the painting was hung in the chapter house on New Year's Eve 1826, together with a portrait of the King—by an unknown hand, which presided over the room— and right opposite the portrait of the governor Ramón de Castro, a hero of the island's defense against a British attack in 1797, painted by José Campeche (1800).ⁱⁱⁱ

This circumstance, as a pendant of Castro's portrait, played a crucial part in Metcalf's choice of a compositional approach that was, to a certain extent, conservative and informed by the tradition of official portraiture in the 18th century.^{iv} This explains the positioning of the figure of the governor, painted in life size against an open space, the inclusion of an inscription in the lower right-hand corner and, to a lesser extent, the presence in the background of the ramparts on the castle of San Cristóbal.

Metcalf sought to modernize – we could almost say naturalize – the image of Governor Torre by distancing him accordingly from the one projected by his predecessor in the position, which rested solely on his military prowess. The inclusion on the right-hand side of the canvas of the façade of the municipal theater gave balance to this approach, emphasizing his authority as civil governor and stressing his role as the promoter of public works on the island. The same may be said of the fruit-laden palm tree, an allusion to his work in favor of the local economy, in perfect contrast to the column in Castro's portrait. Finally, it is no less significant that the painter should choose an “angel seated with bended legs and outspread wings of gold” – according to Córdoba's description – for holding the paper with the laudatory text.

As for the actual portrait itself, it is something of a hybrid due to the use of certain traditional devices in the genre and a romantic air of British inspiration. It remains faithful to the conventions of an official portrait as regards the character's lack of psychological expression and his distancing from the onlooker. This is not the case, however, in terms of his physical depiction, which is truly distinguished, with no idealization or dissimulation, if we are to believe the comments made by his secretary, Córdoba, who affirmed that his master's portrait “has not exceeded the boundaries of his natural appearance, constituting an amazing likeness of his person.” With this painting, Eliab Metcalf lived up to his reputation as a portrait painter who during the first years of the 1820s had received the honor of being the favorite painter of the Caribbean elites.^v While still very young, a chronic lung complaint had provided him with the opportunity to leave his native land (Franklin, Massachusetts) and his pre-destined future as a farmer, in search of a healthier climate. Following a few brief sojourns on the island of Guadalupe and in Canada, he settled in the city of New York, where he came into close contact

with the portrait painters Samuel L. Waldo (1783-1861) and William S. Jewett (1795-1874). In the 1820s, once again seeking to improve his health, he worked sporadically in New Orleans, the Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, and Cuba, where he left major portraits.

The documentary nature of the painting is compounded by an explicit propagandistic intent, which was an aspect that the island's governor pursued with skill and unexpected effectiveness. The inscription held by the angel extols the benefits of his political activities during his first years in office (1822-1826). The first of these is related to the ceremonial staff he is holding in his right hand, as an unequivocal symbol of the political and military power traditionally wielded by the island's governors. This unity was broken during the liberal triennium (Law of 25th April 1820), separating civil government, which was transferred to the supreme political head, from military authority, in the hands of Miguel de la Torre since 30 May 1822. The fall of the liberals and the return to absolutism towards the end of 1823 meant that both were reunited in the figure of the governor and captain general; and as if that were not enough, a Royal Order of 28th May 1825 vested in Torre y Pando extraordinary powers – the famous “omnímodas” (all-embracing or total) – specific to the commander of a besieged city. This was the culmination of a process involving the militarization of power in the person of the governor, the highest representation in Puerto Rico of King Ferdinand's absolutist reign.^{vi}

The text also refers to the governor's military exploits as he sought “to keep the Island secure,” an expression that refers to his defense against outside attack by the continent's separatists, by the forces backed by the English-speaking powers and by smugglers and pirates. Torre y Pando also managed to keep the enemy in check on the home front thanks to the creation of a secret police force that controlled the activities of the liberals and of the few and disorganized pro-independence activists on the island. This notion of security is visually depicted on the left-hand side of the portrait: the barely perceptible pile of cannon balls beside the ceremonial staff; the truncated silhouette of the castle of San Cristóbal, an allusion to the work for reinforcing the fortifications of San Juan; the brass mortars on the parapet, guarded by a sentry; and in the background, at the foot of the Luquillo mountains over which a storm rages, the powder-house of Miraflores, identified by its elongated red roof.

As noted earlier, the right side of the portrait is occupied by a depiction of the façade of the municipal theatre in San Juan de Puerto Rico, according to the project of an engineer called José Navarro y Herrera that Torre y Pando submitted to the capital's city council in 1824, the date that appears on its main frontage.^{vii} The island's first permanent theatre – known as the Tapia Theatre since 1937, in honor of the local writer Alejandro Tapia y Rivera (1826-1882) – was raised on one side of the square then called Santiago (now Colón). It opened on a provisional basis in 1830 with one floor less in height as regards the image presented by Metcalf. It is undoubtedly the finest example of the public works promoted by the governor since his arrival on the island, and especially following the devastating consequences of the Santa Ana hurricane (26th July 1825).^{viii}

ⁱ Following the death of José Campeche in 1809, the island was left without an “artist of sufficient skill to undertake the project,” according to Pedro Tomás de Córdoba, *Memorias geográficas, históricas, económicas y estadísticas de*

Puerto Rico, vol. 5 (San Juan: Oficina del Gobierno, 1833), 154. The authorities in San Juan offered Metcalf a fixed amount and a ship to bring him to the island, where he would be fully employed for six months, in William Dunlap, *History of the rise and progress of the arts of design in the United States*, vol. 2 (New York: George P. Scott and Co., 1834), 232.

ⁱⁱ Lidio Cruz Monclova, *Historia de Puerto Rico (siglo XIX)*, vol. 1 (Río Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1979), 175-208; Jesus Lalinde Abadía, *La administración española en el siglo XIX puertorriqueño* (Seville: Escuela de Estudios Hispanoamericanos, 1980), 125-30; and Emilio de Diego García, *Puerto Rico bajo la administración española durante la primera mitad del siglo XIX* (Madrid: Universidad Complutense de Madrid, 1983), 55-69. Related to the execution of the portrait of Torre y Pando, and in the same spirit of gratitude for his work as governor, there are two petitions dated 1826 and 1830 requesting the King to name him Count of Puerto Rico, which seem to have been ignored, in Córdoba, *Memorias geográficas*, 10-13; and National Historical Archive (AHN), State Administration, bundle 8749, 88 (2-VIII-1830). He would have to wait until 1836 when the Queen Regent granted him the title of Count of Torrepando.

ⁱⁱⁱ It is a portrait of Don Ramón de Castro that now hangs in the Museum of Art and History in San Juan de Puerto Rico, whose measurements of 233 x 163 cm are very close to those of the portrait of Torre y Pando (230 x 162 cm), in Arturo V. Dávila, *José Campeche, 1751-1809* (San Juan: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña, 1971), 42; *José Campeche y su tiempo* (San Juan: Museo de Arte de Ponce, 1988) 192-95; and Ádám Szaszdi Nagy and István Szaszdi León-Borja, *Los gobernadores en la época de Campeche* (San Juan: Fina Estampa Publicadora, 2012).

^{iv} Campeche is believed to have painted the portraits of three governors of Puerto Rico: José Dufresne (1776-1782), although his identify has been placed in doubt in recent years because he is wearing the uniform of captain of the Victoria regiment, in Szaszdi Nagy and Szaszdi León-Borja, *Los gobiernos*; Miguel Antonio de Ustáriz (1789-1792), in José Milicua, “Un retrato de Campeche”, in *Archivo Español de Arte* XXI (1958): 143-44; and the aforementioned Ramón de Castro (1795-1804). The first two, which are small and painted on wood, have little in common with the one of Castro, in which Campeche follows the conventions of official court portraiture, with clear allusions to the iconographic models of Anton Raphael Mengs and Francisco de Goya, with whom he was apparently familiar thanks to prints (respectively, the portrait of Charles III, according to Manuel Salvador Carmona; and the one of General José Urrutia, according to Blas Ametller), in *José Campeche y su tiempo*, 194-95.

^v Dunlap, *History*, 230-33; Mantle Fielding, *Dictionary of American painters, sculptors and engravers* (New York: Apollo, 1988 [1926]), 616; John Russell Harper, *Early painters and engravers in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1970), 222; Daphne Foskett, *A dictionary of British miniature painters*, vol 1. (London: Praeger Publishers, 1972), 404; and Osiris Delgado, “Elijah Metcalf”, in *La Gran Enciclopedia de Puerto Rico. Artes plásticas. Historia de la pintura en Puerto Rico*, vol. 8 (Madrid: Ediciones R, 1981), 35-36.

^{vi} Military values that are present in the uniform of lieutenant general, with sash and sleeves with two gold braids, as worn by the person portrayed. The collar on his army jacket sports a pin with the crosses of merit won in the Peninsular War, where he started off as a lieutenant and ended up as a colonel; the crosses of Talavera, Vitoria, Pamplona and Bayonne, Tolosa of France, the Army of the Left and the Fourth Army. He was part of the expeditionary force in Costa Firme, fighting under the orders of General Morillo against Bolívar and the pro-independence rebels. Visible on his chest are two of the three medals won during this campaign: above, the Grand Cross of the Royal American Order of Isabella the Catholic Queen (1824); and, right below, the laureate cross of a knight of the fourth class of the order of Saint Ferdinand (1825), awarded following the battle of Hato de la Hogaza. His chest is crossed by the sashes of Knight of the Grand Cross of Saint Ferdinand and of Isabella the Catholic Queen, with the latter being scarcely perceptible were it not for the white edging that can be seen just under the former. Hanging from both these sashes are the knight’s badges of these American orders. For Torre y Pando’s military record, see AHN, State Administration, bundles 8718, 100 and 102; the Military Archive in Segovia, Celeb, Box 161, file 17. For his biography and military trajectory, see Adolfo Carrasco y Sayz, *Icono-biografía del Generalato español* (Madrid: Impr. del cuerpo de artillería San Lorenzo, 1901), 751; Pilar León Tello, *El ejército expedicionario de costa firme. Documentos del Conde de Torrepando conservados en el Archivo Histórico Nacional* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1985); Alberto Martín-Lanuz Martínez, *Diccionario biográfico del generalato español. Reinados de Carlos IV y Fernando VII (1788-1833)*, Pamplona: Foro para el Estudio de la Historia Militar de España, 2012), 486-87.

^{vii} Córdoba, *Memorias geográficas*, vol. 4, 2012-12; Alejandro Tapia y Rivera, *Mis memorias o Puerto Rico cómo lo encontré y cómo lo dejo* (Barcelona: Orión, 1968), 112; María de los Ángeles Castro Arroyo, *Arquitectura en San Juan de Puerto Rico (siglo XIX)* (Ríos Piedras: University of Puerto Rico, 1980), 170-75; and Donald Thompson, “Notes on the inauguration of the San Juan (Puerto Rico) Municipal Theater,” in *Latin American Music Review* 11, no. 1 (1990): 84-91.

^{viii} These public works were described in detail, town by town, in annual reports signed by Pedro Tomás de Córdoba that were published as *Relación circunstanciada de todas las obras públicas emprendidas en la isla de Puerto Rico en el año de 1827* (Puerto Rico: Imprenta del Gobierno, 1828). In addition to that year, we also have the reports for 1828, 1829 and 1830, in AHN, State Administration, bundles 6376 and 6377. They also place a great deal of emphasis on the rebuilding work following the destruction caused by the Santa Ana hurricane, and which made the governor so popular.