



2020.095
Diego Antonio de Landaeta (fl. 1749-1799)
Portrait of Petronila Méndez
1763
Oil on panel
6.5 x 7 5/8 in.

This charming portrait shows a young girl in a pink and white gown and delicately holding a nosegay between her be ringed forefingers. Her hair is held back by a pearl encrusted pin, pearl earrings dangle from her ears, and encircling her wrists are bracelets of pearls, all likely fished in the Caribbean waters off the east coast of Venezuela.¹ Peeking above the lace neckline of her dress are several gold chains, and a choker of pearls clutches her throat. The inscription on the reverse of the work identifies the sitter as Petronila Méndez and notes that it was made on July 17, 1763, when she was exactly 9 years, 8 months, 23 days, and 11 hours old. From her dress to her abundant jewelry to the fan carefully resting in her left hand, Méndez bears the attributes of a much older and more sophisticated woman. While refined, the clothing and jewelry featured in

¹ The first pearl fisheries were established in the waters off the islands of Cubagua and Margarita and were worked by enslaved indigenous and Black divers. On these divers, see recent work by Mónica Domínguez-Torres, including, “Pearl Fishing in the Caribbean: Early Images of Slavery and Forced Migration in the Americas” in *African Diaspora in the Cultures of Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States*, ed. Persephone Braham (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2015), 73-82.

this portrait suggest that the sitter was a member of the emerging middle class rather than a member of Caracas' elite, the planter class.² Though not as pronounced as those featured in Mexican portraits of the 18th century, Méndez also bears a small beauty mark on her cheek (known as *chiqueadores*), a symbol of flirtation and availability. Méndez' even gaze at the viewer and dignified posture belie her tender age.

Surrounding the work is an elaborate gilt frame bearing foliate designs, though perhaps lacking some of the sophistication of others made by the master carver Domingo Gutiérrez. This little portrait is remarkable for being not only the only identified portrait of a child from colonial Venezuela, but also the only known work by its author, the Afrodescendant artist Diego Antonio de Landaeta.

Based on the inscription on the reverse of the painting, we can estimate that Petronila Méndez was born on October 24 or 25, 1753. Unfortunately, no baptismal records matching her birth can be found in the parishes of Caracas. However, a marriage record from 24 February 1773 of one Petronila Méndez to Domingo Maucó almost certainly relates to the same woman. In the record, Méndez declares herself to be the legitimate daughter of Pablo Méndez and [María] Josefa Romero, themselves married in March 1752.³ Petronila was the second of seven children born to the couple, six of whom survived to adulthood.⁴ Petronila Méndez and Domingo Maucó went on to have at least five children together, their first son, Domingo Antonio Eleno de la Soledad, born only seven months after their marriage in August 1773. While several of their children lived to advanced ages (a daughter Josefa María de Jesus Maucó, born in 1780, died at the age of 82), another daughter, Maria del Carmen, died at the age of 18. Petronila herself died suddenly in 1831 at the advanced age of 77, before she was able to receive Last Rites.

The work was produced by Diego Antonio de Landaeta, an Afrodescendant painter active in 18th-century Caracas. Landaeta came from a large family of Afrodescendant artists and musicians active in Caracas in the 18th century. Among the more famous members were the master painter Antonio José Landaeta (d. 1799) and the composer and instrument maker Juan José Landaeta (1780-1812). Tracing the family lineage of this group is difficult as there were around twenty-four families of *pardos libres* with this name in Caracas at the same time.⁵ While only recently gaining recognition in contemporary scholarship, Afrodescendant painters and artisans preponderated in various parts of South America and the Caribbean during the colonial period, though this has been best documented in Brazil and Cuba. Landaeta's racial designation as a *pardo libre* did not, however, prevent him from owning and selling Black slaves.⁶

Little is known of Landaeta's early life; he was born to an enslaved *morena* mother, Faustina Rosa de Landaeta, who worked in the service of Sargento Mayor Don Manuel de Landaeta. When the latter died in 1759 without (legitimate) issue, Diego was named as an heir, suggesting that Manuel de Landaeta had fathered Diego with Faustina. Diego Antonio de

² My thanks go to James Middleton for this observation. Personal communication, August 2021.

³ Please see the attached digitized parish records from FamilySearch.

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⁵ Janeth Rodríguez Nóbrega, "La pintura venezolana de finales del siglo XVIII y principios del XIX. Lenguajes en tránsito," *Atrio Revista de Historia del Arte* 25 (2019), 152. See also Duarte, *Diccionario*, 124. Ann Twinam documents a case from one member of the extended Landaeta clan in *Purchasing Whiteness: Pardos, Mulattos, and the Quest for Social Mobility in the Spanish Indies* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015).

⁶ Duarte, *Diccionario*, 115, 117.

Landaeta was married twice, first in 1749 to his cousin, Josefa Manuela de Landaeta and, after her death in 1761, to Juana María Rubí – a marriage that produced 10 children – suggesting that he was born sometime in the 1720s.⁷ By the 1760s, Landaeta had achieved the rank of master painter (*Maestro de Pintor*) and at various points in his life was called to appraise paintings for the estates of wealthy *caraqueños*. In his adulthood, Landaeta settled in the village of Petare, now located on the outskirts of Caracas, where he donated several artworks to the parish church, including images of Our Lady of Sorrows and another of Veronica.⁸ When Landaeta drew up his will in 1759, he requested to be buried in the habit of a Franciscan monk and as a member of the confraternity of Our Lady of Sorrows housed at the Church of Altagracia. Landaeta died sometime around 1799, though the exact date of his death is unknown.

This portrait of the young Petronila is in fact the only extant work known to be by Diego Antonio de Landaeta's hand. While documents attest to various works he created, including another portrait of Don José Domingo Jerez de Aristeguieta in 1784, none of these works has been identified. The Méndez portrait is unusual in its diminutive scale, with no other Venezuelan portraits taking this form.

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⁷ Carlos 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), 115-119.

⁸ Landaeta indicated a lifelong devotion to both the Virgin of Sorrows and to the Veronica, later acting as a guarantor on a *censo* (loan) taken out by his brother for the Feast of St. Veronica. He was a member of the Confraternity of Our Lady of Sorrows, housed at the church of Altagracia, the same church where his many children were baptized. See Duarte, *Diccionario*, 115-17.