



2015.066

Unidentified Artist

West Indies

Portrait of a Woman and her Son

Oil on canvas, frame 57 5/8 x 49 3/16 x 1 7/8 inches

The costume and coiffeur of the woman pictured in the portrait with her son bears comparison with a portrait by Vicente Escobar, an artist born in Havana who studied in Madrid at the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando (fig. 1). The comparison suggests that the two paintings are of approximately the same date, but the Thoma painting is more provincial than the one by Escobar, who had the advantage of an academic training.

The less sophisticated hand made errors in perspective that in no way diminish the charm of the portraits. The boy, who is passing stems of flowers to his mother to place in the vase, wears a white garment similar to that pictured in Francisco de Goya's portrait of a boy of around 1810 (fig. 2). The boys' haircuts are also similar, with feathery bangs resting lightly on their brows.



Fig. 1. Vicente Escobar (1757-1834), *Portrait of Justa de Allo y Bermúdez*, oil on canvas, 93 x 72 cm. Museo de Arte Colonial, Havana.

The colonial period in Cuba continued until 1898, unlike the rest of Spanish America that had declared independence after long and costly battles. Cuba's sugar industry, in particular, boomed and both Creole and peninsular Spaniards became wealthy, many of them resident in Cuban cities towns beyond Havana. However, this painting may have been created elsewhere in the Caribbean.

We may imagine that this double portrait represents the wife and son of a sugar planter who made his fortune in the West Indies and whose descendants later returned to Spain with the portrait. That would explain its appearance at a Madrid auction house. On the other hand, most family portraits like this either represent father with their sons or mothers with their daughters. In the case of the Thoma painting, it is possible that the woman is a wealthy widow.

Portrait paintings created during the nineteenth century share similarities whether they were created in New England or in Chile by Gil de Castro. The simple setting and the woman's light clothing suggest a Caribbean source, as the urban dwellers of Mexico and South America had quite elegant, even ostentatious taste.



Fig. 2. Francisco de Goya, *José Costa y Bonells*, ca. 1810. Metropolitan Museum of Art.



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