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José Campeche (1751-1809)

Portrait of a Woman in Mourning (María Teresa Tobía y Bazán de Castro)

c. 1805

Oil on canvas, 39 x 30 2/3 inches

José Campeche was born in San Juan, Puerto Rico in 1751, the mulatto son of Tomás Campeche and María Jordán. He studied philosophy, humanities and music in the Dominican monastery in San Juan. His father, who was a painter, gilder, and decorator, was José's art teacher and principal artistic influence until the Spanish painter Luis Paret y Alcázar arrived in Puerto Rico.

Paret had been court painter to Don Luis de Borbón, brother of King Carlos III of Spain. Accused of assisting Don Luis in his love affairs, Paret was exiled to Puerto Rico in 1775, though allowed to return to Spain four years later. From Paret, José Campeche learned the very accomplished styles and techniques then practiced in the courts of Europe. He painted religious and history subjects but is best known for his portraits. He died in 1809 but remains one of the most famous of all Puerto Rican artists.

Campeche was adept at absorbing the rococo elements of Paret's example, and soon proved equally open to neoclassicism, as evinced in his portrait of the daughters of Governor Ramón de Castro (fig. 1). The Thoma *Portrait of a Woman in Mourning*, painted about two years before the artist's death, even reflects new Romantic currents.¹



Fig. 1. José Campeche, *Portrait of María de Guadalupe and María del Carmen Rafaela de Castro Tobía*, 1797, oil on canvas, 45 x 32 inches, Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico, Santurce, Puerto Rico.

Ramón de Castro (fig. 2) married María Teresa Tobía y Bazán in the Spanish city of Burgos in 1769, when she was around sixteen years of age. Four years later, he was named Captain General, Intendant and Governor of Puerto Rico, and not long afterward was named brigadier. The portrait of Ramón de Castro shows him as defender of the port of San Juan against the British.



Fig. 2. José Campeche, *Portrait of Governor Ramón de Castro*, 1801, oil on canvas, 90 x 65 inches. Museo de Puerto Rico, San Juan.

The couple had two daughters, María de Guadalupe Josefa de Castro Tobía (born in 1793) and María del Carmen Rafael de Castro Tobía (born in 1795). In late 1804 the girls died of yellow fever. The same year Ramón de Castro lost his position as governor and the couple retired to the town of Guaynabo until they were able to return in Spain in 1808. Curiously, they took none of the family portraits by Campeche with them.

Osiris Delgado Mercado identified the woman in mourning as the wife of the governor based on her approximate age and the ages of the girls in their 1797 portrait. No one has disputed this identification of the sitter, though recent research has changed the date of its creation from ca. 1807 to 1805.ⁱⁱ María Teresa's black mourning dress, her pendant representing Our Lady of Sorrows and the vase of roses often associated with that devotion reflect her state of heart and mind.

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ⁱ Osiris Delgado Mercado, the highly regarded scholar of Campeche's oeuvre, attributed this painting to him on the basis of style, scientific analysis of the pigments used, and the fact that no other Caribbean painter of the time could have created such a fine, emotionally nuanced portrait. Delgado Mercado, in notes by him in the files of the Thoma collection, identified the sitter, as discussed here.

ⁱⁱ This author and the Thoma Foundation are thankful to Ronda Kasl's research on the date of the plague of yellow fever in San Juan and mourning practices of the time.