



Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa (1629-1667)

St. Roch

17th century

Oil on canvas

69.5 x 37.1875 in.

This image from the Viceroyalty of New Granada, attributed to the hand of Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa (1629-1667), depicts Saint Roch, a 14th century from Montpellier, France.¹ Roch is one of over 100 “plague saints” who were invoked for succor from the Bubonic Plague as it ravaged Europe. The life of the saint is recorded in the *Golden Legend* and various medieval

¹ See for example Irene Vaslef, “The role of St. Roch as a Plague Saint: A Late Medieval Hagiographic Tradition” (PhD thesis, The Catholic University of America, 1984).

vitae.² Following the pious model of St. Francis of Assisi, Roch left home after the death of his wealthy parents, giving away his worldly goods and dedicating himself to the poor. Dressed in the robes of a pilgrim, Roch set out for Rome as a mendicant. Upon his arrival in Italy, Roch distinguished himself by caring for those afflicted with bubonic plague, whom he cured through the laying on of hands and the sign of the cross. Among the miraculous cures Roch effected was the healing of an English cardinal, who later recommended him to the Pope. As a result of his tireless healing efforts, the saint contracted the plague and was forced to retreat into the wilderness to recover. During his convalescence, a dog brought Roch bread every day for sustenance and an angel healed the bubo that formed in his groin. According to his traditional biography, after returning to Montpellier, Roch was arrested as a spy and eventually died in prison.

Images of St. Roch proliferated in certain regions of the Spanish empire, particularly the Philippines, Colombia, and Argentina.³ While many of these images were sculptural, paintings of Roch were particularly popular in 17th-century Bogotá, several of them attributed to Vargas or his circle.

Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa was born in Bogotá in 1629 to a family of artists; he was the son of painter Gaspar de Figueroa (c. 1594-1658) and grandson of Baltasar de Figueroa “el Viejo,” a painter from Seville. Vargas de Figueroa trained in his father’s studio, and at times the pair collaborated on artworks, making it difficult to distinguish their work. He is noted for the care with which he depicted faces and garments, but equally struggled with the proportion of his figures and in depicting hands.⁴ Unlike his father Gaspar, Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa painted few portraits, restricting most of his output to religious imagery. During his career, Vargas de Figueroa completed commissions for many of Bogotá’s most significant religious institutions, among them the Discalced Carmelite convent, the convent of La Concepción, and church of San Francisco. Vargas de Figueroa and his father are also said to have trained the noted painter Gregorio Vásquez de Arce y Ceballos (1638-1711) in their studio; an oft-repeated legend suggests that the Figueroas banished Vásquez from the workshop owing to their jealousy over his superior talent.

In the Thoma painting, the saint stands dressed in the robes of a pilgrim and draped with a cape, his right hand at his breast, drawing the eye to the scallop shell pilgrim’s badge pinned there. Behind his head is a wide-brimmed pilgrim’s hat. The saint’s proper left hand rests at his side, grasping a book and a staff. At his waist is a gourd hanging from a red cord. Minimally visible is the injury in the saint’s leg, in contrast to other images of Roch which show him lifting his robes to reveal the lesion. Peering out around the saint’s right leg is his faithful dog, holding a roll in its mouth. At some point in its history, the painting was cut down and the feet of the saint and his canine companion are missing. Overhead, an angel holds a wreath over the saint’s head against the backdrop of golden sky and puffy, schematic white clouds.

This iconography is virtually identical to several other examples found in Bogotá, among them two paintings attributed to Vargas de Figueroa at the church of Santa Barbara (fig. 1) and Museo Santa Clara and anonymous paintings at the Palacio Arzobispal and Banco de la República. All of these examples have a common iconographic source in an engraving produced

² Among these are *Vita sancti Rochi* by Francesco Diedo (1479), *Istoria di San Rocco* by Domenico da Vicenza (1478/80), and the *Acta breviori* published in Cologne in 1483.

³ Hector Schenone, *Iconografía del arte colonial: Los santos*, vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Fundación Tarea, 1992), 678.

⁴ Fajardo Rueda, op. cit.

by Cornelis Cort in 1577 (fig. 2).⁵ As was common among colonial artists, Vargas de Figueroa relied on engravings as compositional models and numerous prints were found among his possession at his death.⁶



Fig. 1 Baltasar Vargas de Figueroa, *Saint Roch*, 17th century. Iglesia de Santa Barbara, Bogotá.

⁵ See PESSCA 859A/859B.

⁶ Many of these prints were indeed bequeathed to Vargas by his father, Gaspar in his own will. F. Gil de Tovar, “La pintura de los Figueroa” in *Los Figueroa: aproximación a su época y a su pintura* (Colombia: Villegas, 1986), 73.



Fig. 2 Cornelis Cort after Hans Speckaert, *Saint Roch*, 1577, engraving. British Museum, London.

Of these examples, the Thoma painting bears the strongest resemblance to that at Santa Barbara. The figure of Saint Roch in both works is rather elongated, and the hands are rather sensitively depicted in both, perhaps suggesting the intervention of Figueroa's father Gaspar, who was noted for his superior ability to render hands.⁷ The painting at Santa Barbara features a brighter palette of ochre and rose in the garments of the saint, which hang in sharper folds than those of the Thoma painting. The face of the saint in the Santa Barbara image is also more sensitively depicted, with his eyes cast heavenward at the angel bearing a wreath above him.

⁷ *Los Figueroa: aproximación a su época y a su pintura* (Colombia: Villegas, 1986), cat. 98.

During a recent scientific study of the Thoma painting, x-radiography uncovered an unusual feature: a full-length male portrait painted beneath its surface (fig. 3). The portrait sitter wears a costume consistent with the period of c. 1640, but more aligned with trends in Flemish dress than Hispanic.⁸ Few 17th-century portraits from Nueva Granada survive to serve as comparanda, as portraiture did not take hold as a significant genre in painting until the 18th century.⁹ Extant portraits largely represent religious and civil authorities, though imagined portraits of noble ancestors were created as a claim to lineage and titles (see for example the set of Vega del Ren portraits from 18th-century Lima in the Thoma Collection).¹⁰

The canvas on which the work is painted is somewhat unusual for Latin American works in that it is not patched together from multiple pieces of fabric. Perhaps Vargas de Figueroa recycled a portrait created by his father for a client, or perhaps reused an imported work that arrived in Colombia. Unlike portraits typically created in South America, the overpainted portrait lacks a coat of arms and cartouche giving the biographical information of the sitter, giving credence to the suggestion that it was a reworked, imported work or an incomplete commission.

⁸ James Middleton, personal communication, August 2021.

⁹ *Catálogo Museo Colonial Volumen I: Pintura* (Bogotá: Ministerio de Cultura, 2016), 202.

¹⁰ For more on portraiture in Nueva Granada, see María Constanza Villalobos Acosta, “El retrato en Santafé, Nuevo Reino de Granada” in *Barroco vivo, barroco continuo*, ed. Fernando Quiles García and María del Pilar López (Bogota and Seville: Universidad Nacional de Colombia and E.R.A. Arte, Creación y Patrimonio Iberoamericanos en Redes, 2019), 74-89.

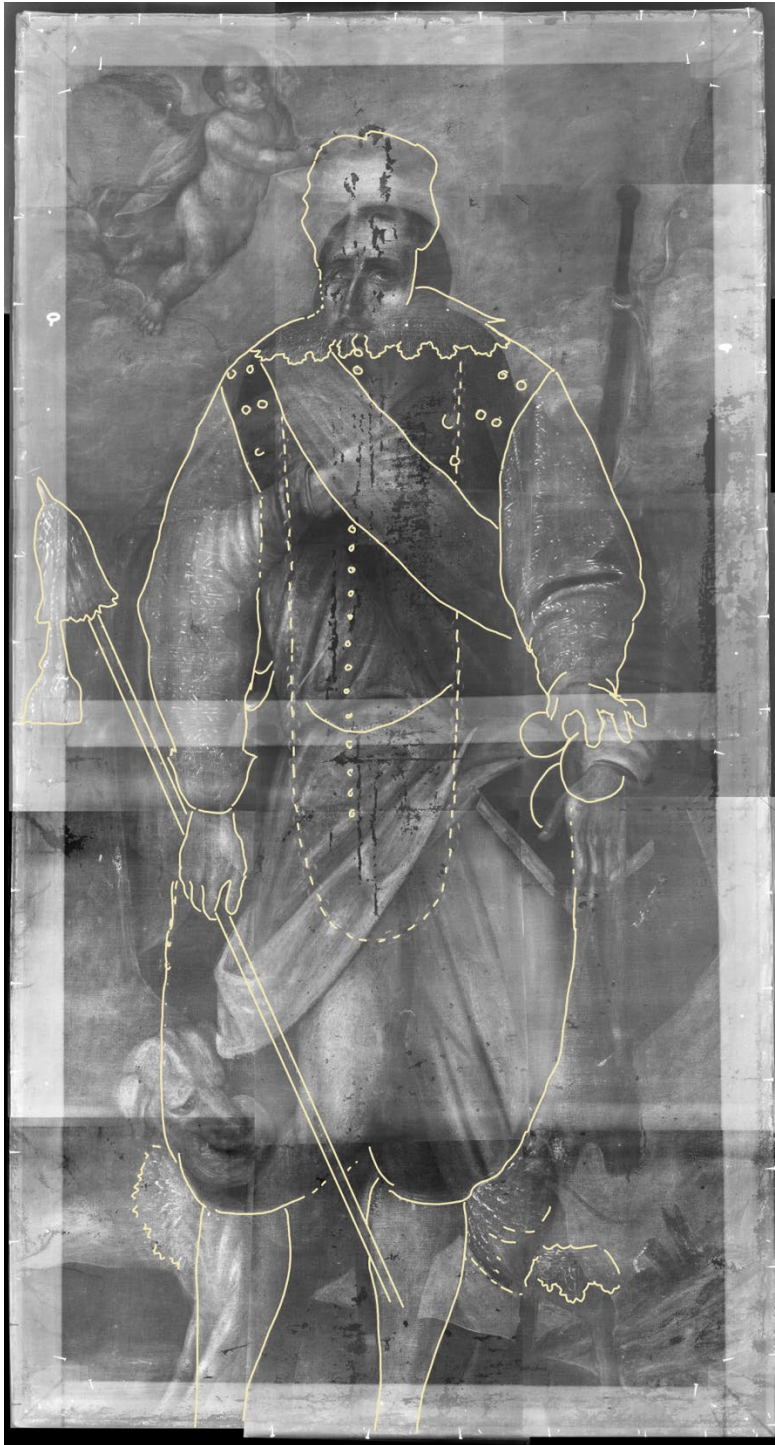


Fig. 3 X-ray with outline showing male portrait. Image courtesy Parma Conservation Lab, Chicago.