



2014.049

José Campeche y Jordán (1751-1809)

Puerto Rico

*Tobias and the Angel*

1787

Oil on canvas, 21 1/4 x 15 1/3 inches

Inscriptions: Signed and dated on the reverse of the canvas, *Josef Campeche f. ano 1787.*



Fig. 1. Ramón Atilés y Pérez (1804-1875), copy of a self-portrait by Campeche of ca. 1800. (Wikipedia Commons)

José Campeche was born in San Juan on December 23, 1751 to Tomás de Rivafrecha Campeche, a freed slave born in Puerto Rico who worked as a gilder, decorator, and painter as well as a musician at the cathedral, and to María Josefa Jordán Marqués, a native of the Canary Islands. Along with his brothers, Miguel and Ignacio, José was trained in his father's studio, but he was also educated at the Dominican monastery in San Juan and became a member of the Third Order of that house. His career began modestly with small commissions. *A Saint Joseph and the Christ Child* dated 1772 is his earliest known painting.

In 1775 a painter from Spain arrived in Puerto Rico who would exercise immense influence on Campeche, an influence that would make the artist outstanding among his contemporaries in Spanish America. The Spanish painter Luis Paret y Alcázar (1746-1799) was exiled to Puerto Rico by the Council of Castile, having been accused of assisting Don Luis de Borbón, brother of King Charles III, in his love affairs. Paret, who had studied at the Academia de San Fernando in Madrid and spent 1763-66 in Rome, brought a very high style with him to the Caribbean, where Campeche became his avid follower until Paret's return to Spain four years later.

José Campeche was a painter of both religious subjects and portraits in which he recorded details of the furnishings, coiffures, and costumes of Puerto Rican society in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Campeche died on November 2, 1809 in the house he had lived in since birth, having never left his native island.

Despite his popularity as a portrait artist, most of Campeche's oeuvre consists of paintings of devotional subjects created for religious institutions and individuals, with images of the Virgin Mary, the Holy Family, and the saints predominant. Indeed, this representation of "Tobias and the Angel," based on the biblical Book of Tobit, is an unusual theme in Spanish colonial art. Tobit's son Tobias was sent by his father to far-off Media to collect a sum of money he had left there. Saint Raphael the Archangel introduced himself as a kinsman and offered to accompany Tobit on his journey. Along the way, Raphael ordered Tobit to capture a large fish and to remove its heart, liver, and gall bladder to make medicines. Eventually, the gall was used to cure Tobit's blindness and his traveling companion revealed himself to Tobias as "the angel Raphael, one of the seven who stood before the Lord (Tobit 12:15).

Paret's legacy is seen in the loose brushwork with which Campeche quickly suggests the effects of light upon flesh and fabrics. The latter is particularly noticeable in the treatment of the "pilgrim's cape" beneath Raphael's bright red mantle, where the golden highlights are applied with a thin, almost watery, wash. The same sure but light touch illuminates the faces of "Tobias and the Angel."

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt