



Unknown artist

Colombia

Portrait of Don Felipe Santiago de Silva y Mesa

Late 18th century

Oil with gold on canvas, 31 ½ x 23 ¼ inches

Inscribed on the note in the sitter's hand: *A Don Felipe Santiago de Silva y Mesa de Corral/ Oficial Mayor de la Cámara de la Real Audiencia/ Santafé*

Don Felipe was born in Santafé de Bogotá, capital of the New Kingdom of Granada, in 1758. He was married to another creole born in Santafé in 1786. He served as an “*escribano por el Rey*” (a royal notary public) in the departments of Zipaquirá and Ubaté, both in the region of Cundinamarca (in present-day Colombia). He bore the title of “*Notario de la Santa Cruzada.*”¹

¹ Salvador Grau Sánchez, “Los apellidos del Becerro de Behetrías y sus asentamientos en América (*continuación*),” *Hidalguía*, no. 288 (2001): 633-655 at p. 637. I am grateful to Verónica Muñoz-Najar Luque for the reference published by Dialnet.

According to the inscription on the painting, he was a senior member of the *Real Audiencia* established in Santafé in the sixteenth century. It is possible that the portrait celebrates his ascent to that position, a more impressive one than *escribano*, but when that occurred is unknown.

Don Felipe, wearing a wig, poses next to his family escutcheon, with the typically drawn red curtain to his proper left. His bland features are nearly overwhelmed by the brilliance of his costume. It is based on the ordinary blue jacket of the Spanish military, but generously enhanced by floral designs in the fabric of the vest and sleeves.

The pose of the sitter, and the accoutrements of family crest and ubiquitous red drapery are common to portraits of members of the royal bureaucracy. There is even a table, though unused, behind Don Felipe. However, the dazzling use of so much gold, though common in paintings of religious subjects in colonial South America, is rarely seen in portraiture.

Suzanne Stratton-Pruitt