
The peculiar story of a Vermay's painting...not painted by Vermay

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Until not long ago, one of the paintings at the National Museum of Fine Arts (NMFA) was believed to be painted by French artist Juan Bautista Vermay. However, a recent research confirmed the suspicions regarding its authorship.

This story begins in the early years of the 19th century when the French painter, sculptor, scene painter, and poet Juan Bautista Vermay moved into Havana to make a new life and career in the island.

It is not a common artist as some may think: he was even named Painter in Residence at the Court of Fernando VII, by Real Decree 1826. In 1818, he was appointed the first director of the Free School of Drawing and Painting of Havana, turned into the San Alejandro Academy at present times.

He headed the institutions until 1833 facing some plots to steal his thunder. He died the same year victim of the cholera epidemic.

His death left Cuba without one of its major masters of the arts. After his death became public, great poet Jose Maria Heredia sent from Mexico some verses about him.

Vermay's imprint in Cuba was mainly seen in the educational field as few of his vast

work are preserved; namely, the paintings in El Templete; the portrait of a man in the National Museum of Fine Arts; a San Juan Bautista, painted in 1829, belonging to the Provincial Museum of Matanzas...and few more things.

One of those popular paintings, exhibited at the colonial art room of the National Museum of Fine Arts, turned out Vermay was not actually the author. It is still unknown who was the real author of the portrait of Manrique de Lara's family, but it was confirmed Vermay was not.

Someone joked around in colloquium held at the Fine Arts: "It is the best present we can make to the famous painter." And certainly, the work does not look to be painted by a high-ranked painter as the technique is clearly poor...

DOUBTS AND CONFIRMATION

"There were always doubts about the authorship of the portrait —said Boris Morejon de Vega, head of the department of Restoration of the NMFA who just presented the results of a particular research in his doctoral thesis." It was crystal clear something was wrong when comparing this portrait with others of his own.

"Next to the portrait you can see *Retrato de un Hombre*, painted by Vermay in 1819. The differences are outrageous. The painter who made such a portrait had training, a refined technique...the one drawing the family, certainly not.

"The problem is that back in 1940, when it was said that Vermay was the author of the portrait *La familia Manrique de Lara*, there were no other works of the painter to compare with. Back then, the only works of art were the deteriorated canvas in El Templete.

"The few works, painted and signed by Vermay in Havana (the portrait of the family was not signed), were not known at the time as they belonged to private collections.

We studied those works hard for the research and the results of the analysis are unquestionable. The differences observed in the methods of execution have nothing to do with the familiar portrait."

Painter and art critic Jorge Rigol had already stated his doubts in 1983. Such doubts led to a revision of the authorship. And from 2001, the portrait began to be exhibited as "attributed to Vermay."

The present research included X-ray, chemical analysis as well as a detailed study of the drawing and the structure. Other features observed were the neo-classic style, with the collaboration of important and prestigious specialists and institutions.

"The public visiting our room now in the Museum can read in the painting file: Author: Anonymous, 19th century."

BUT IT IS WORTH TO SEE THE PAINTING

But they do not cancel each other out. The portrait has its own value worthy of being exhibited at the NMFA.

“It is one of the most popular paintings in the museum. It is big and causes empathy. It offers information of the time and several elements that call your attention,” said Delia Maria Lopez Campistrous, specialist in charge of the collection *Cambio de Siglo*.

“We are going to keep it there as it has many cultural and artistic values. Besides, we are talking about one of the most popular portraits of the Museum.”

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