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The Vargas Portrait: By Whom and When Was It Painted?

JOHN L. KESSELL

Self-assured in court dress and attended by the attributes of a military career, the subject of the full-length painting is undoubtedly don Diego de Vargas. At present, however, there are unanswered questions about the portrait. By whom and when was it painted? Was it painted from life? If not, did the artist use an earlier likeness of don Diego? Who commissioned the painting and when?

Perhaps a Spanish art historian, by close study of the Vargas portrait and its companion (of Juan Antonio López de Zárate), will be able to identify the artist. As yet, no specific mention of the paintings in wills or other family documents—at least not in Vargas' generation or that of his children—has come to light. Inventories of the furnishings in the private chapel of San Isidro, where the paintings hang—if such

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Don Diego de Vargas, as portrayed in a drawing by José Cisneros from Cisneros' *Riders Across the Centuries* (1984). This evocative modern drawing is closely based on the portrait of Vargas reproduced in color on the cover of this issue, and again on page 306. Note the addition of the dagger cross insignia of the military Order of Santiago on his jacket. Despite the inscription on the original painting concerning Vargas' membership in this order, researchers for the Vargas Project have ascertained that he was never admitted to the order. Courtesy of Texas Western Press of the University of Texas at El Paso.

inventories still exist—could provide clues. Even better would be a copy of the contract between the artist and his client or clients.¹

Vargas did know a famous artist. In the summer of 1670, two years before he left Madrid for the Indies, don Diego leased for four years an apartment in the renovated Vargas family complex to court painter Francisco de Herrera, the Younger, a native of Seville trained in Italy. The flamboyant don Francisco had loaned Vargas money, and the lease served as security.²

The association is interesting, but the relatively inferior quality of the two paintings in question, obvious even to an untrained eye, rules out Herrera as the artist. It is possible, of course, that Herrera did paint a portrait of Vargas, a different one, or arrange for an apprentice or someone else to do so. A brief physical description of don Diego, recorded in 1672, is not at notable variance with the man pictured on the surviving canvas.³

Surely don Diego, bidding farewell to his wife and children, would have wished to leave them his portrait, along with his will and the inventory of his holdings. Vargas understood the value of a picture as remembrance. Nineteen years later, from El Paso, he would beg his elder daughter and son-in-law to send him portraits of the family.⁴

The two portraits in the chapel of San Isidro today seem, on the

1. In none of his three extant wills did Diego de Vargas list paintings of any kind or, for that matter, other household furnishings. Diego de Vargas, Wills; Madrid, June 21, 1672, Protocolo 10.125, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid, Madrid, Spain; Mexico City, June 1, 1703, Notaría 692, Archivo General de Notarías del Distrito Federal, Mexico City; Bernalillo, April 7, 1704, I:1027, Spanish Archives of New Mexico. Neither did he include such details in the 1672 inventory of his holdings. Diego de Vargas, Listing of the entire estate, Torrelaguna, August 9, 1672, Archive of the Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas, Madrid, Spain. His son-in-law and daughter made no mention of paintings in their wills. Ignacio López de Zárate to Isabel María de Vargas Pimentel and Juan Antonio Pimentel, Power of attorney to make a will, Madrid, October 28, 1706, Protocolo 14.570, Will of Isabel María de Vargas Pimentel, Madrid, January 22, 1718, Protocolo 14.868, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid.

2. Contract between Diego de Vargas and Francisco de Herrera, Madrid, July 31, 1670, Protocolo 11.431, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid. Herrera, first appointed court painter by Felipe IV, was reappointed in 1672 by Carlos II, who later made him Assistant Keeper of the Palace Keys and Royal Architect. Herrera died in Madrid in 1685. See Jonathan M. Brown, "Herrera the Younger: Baroque Artist and Personality," *Apollo*, 84 (July 1966), 34–43.

3. Diego de Vargas, Proof of legitimacy, Madrid, June 21, 1672, Protocolo 10.956, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid.

4. Diego de Vargas to Isabel María de Vargas Pimentel, September 23, 1691, and Diego de Vargas to Ignacio López de Zárate, September 25, 1691, Archive of the Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas. There is no evidence that don Diego ever received the family portraits he requested.

basis of circumstantial evidence, to have been painted about 1740, long after the deaths of two men whose memories they perpetuate. It is likely that Vargas' grandson, don Diego José López de Zárate Vargas Pimentel Zapata y Luján Ponce de León Cepeda Alvarez Contreras y Salinas, Marqués de Villanueva de la Sagra and Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas, commissioned them. What better way to memorialize the first holders of the two titles he had inherited: Juan Antonio López de Zárate, first Marqués de Villanueva de la Sagra, and Vargas, first Marqués de la Nava de Barcinas.⁵

For at least twenty years, don Diego José had been petitioning the Spanish crown for payment in arrears of the four thousand-peso annual revenue awarded to his grandfather for two heirs in succession. Finally successful in 1737, López de Zárate Vargas must have received a considerable sum. "Very possibly," writes historian Lansing B. Bloom, "it was this sudden affluence which enabled the Marquis to publish in Madrid in 1740 his genealogical history of the illustrious Vargas family."⁶ This same affluence may also have motivated don Diego José to commission the two paintings.

The inaccurate legend on the Vargas portrait appears to be a scrambled version of the entry for don Diego in his grandson's privately printed genealogy. Using the same phrases, the author of the legend combined the fact that Vargas had rescued sacred vessels during his reconquest of New Mexico and the fact that he had died at Bernalillo while on campaign. The resulting juxtaposition has don Diego dying in open warfare during an attempt to rescue the sacred vessels at

5. Juan Antonio López de Zárate (1646–1698), knight of the Order of Santiago, was serving in the important capacity of Secretario del Despacho Universal, responsible for the promulgation of royal decrees, when he died. Although he provided for the disposition of several unspecified engravings or paintings in his will, don Juan Antonio listed no portrait of himself. Will of Juan Antonio López de Zárate, Madrid, February 5, 1698, Protocolo 12120, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid. Because he had no children or grandchildren, Juan Antonio bequeathed his noble title of Castile, which he had enjoyed since 1686, to his younger brother, Ignacio López de Zárate (1647–1707), Diego de Vargas' son-in-law. With Ignacio's death, the title passed to his son, Vargas' grandson, Diego José López de Zárate Vargas.

Granted in 1698, Diego de Vargas' own noble title, after his death in 1704, descended on his elder daughter, Isabel María (1665–1718), and then, after her demise, on Diego José (1691–1745), the first person to hold both titles. For additional biographical detail, see José Pérez Balsera, *Laudemus viros gloriosos et parentes nostros in generatione sua* (Madrid: Tipografía Católica, 1931).

6. Lansing B. Bloom, "The Vargas Encomienda," *New Mexico Historical Review*, 14 (October 1939), 414. Diego José López de Zárate Vargas, *Breve descripción genealógica de la ilustre, quanto antiquísima casa de los Vargas de Madrid* (Madrid: n.p., 1740).

Bernalillo.⁷ If the family in Spain learned of Vargas' earlier heroics at the mining town of Teutila in Oaxaca, where he rushed into the burning parish church in 1676 to save the sacred images, their retelling of that episode may explain in part the confusion about the details of his death.⁸

Evidently the two portraits were executed by the same artist. The lettering of the legends on both appears to be that of one person. Yet the treatment of the subjects is understandably different, even stereotypical. Vargas is represented as a noble military figure, while Juan Antonio López de Zárate assumes the stance of a noble lawyer and councilor of the king. It may be that an expert in seventeenth and eighteenth-century dress can provide clues to when the paintings were done, pointing out, for example, some detail or other only in vogue at a certain time.

In 1741, when don Diego José drew up the draft of a will in his own hand, he stated that he was adding to the Vargas entail in Madrid three religious statues so that they would always remain in the family's oratory, or private chapel. His mother, before her death in 1718, had asked him to do so. The images, made in Naples, were of San José, San Isidro Labrador, and Santa María de la Cabeza. Unfortunately, he said nothing about paintings or other furnishings of the chapel.⁹

After Diego José López de Zárate Vargas died in 1745, his entails and his two titles passed to his eldest son, Antonio María. With the latter's death in 1792, they devolved upon don Diego José's second son, Ignacio. When Ignacio dictated his will in 1803, he reiterated his father's provision that the three statues be entailed and kept in the oratory, for which, he added, he had borne the cost and obtained a bull from the pope. He then listed other items that should be included

7. The relative passages from the genealogy are: "libertadose las Santas Imagenes, y Vasos Sagrados . . . en cuya Conquista proseguia su infatigable zelo, quando el año de 1704, perdió la vida en Campaña Rasa, en el Sitio de Bernalillo" ("having saved the holy images and sacred vessels . . . during which campaign he carried on with indefatigable zeal, when, in the year 1704, he lost his life in open warfare at the site [or, in the siege] of Bernalillo"). López de Zárate Vargas, *Breve descripción genealógica*, 12–13. The legend on the painting, however, reads: "perdio la Vida en Canpaña Rasa por libertar los Vasos Sagrados en el Sitio de Bernalillo, año de MDCCIV."

8. Payo de Rivera Enríquez, Exemption from tribute, Mexico City, March 6, 1677, *Indios* 25:232, Archivo General de la Nación, Mexico City, Mexico.

9. Will of Diego José López de Zárate Vargas, Madrid, April 6, 1741, Protocolo 15.840, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid; Pérez Balsera, *Laudemus viros gloriosos*, 91–97. On page 116, Pérez Balsera states that, according to a document in his possession, López de Zárate's ancestors serving in Italy commissioned noted Neapolitan sculptors to fashion the statues of San Isidro Labrador and Santa María de la Cabeza.

in the family's Madrid entail: two relics—a cord of San Francisco de Paula and a staff of San Pedro de Alcántara—and “the portraits of my ancestors.”¹⁰

The need for further study is obvious. A more pressing need, however, is for conservation, particularly of the Vargas portrait. In the late 1980s, the crackle is severe in places. Perhaps a reader of the *New Mexico Historical Review* will underwrite the costs of study and conservation. After all, it would be a great shame to allow the deterioration of the only known portrait of don Diego de Vargas, by whomever and whenever it was painted.

10. Will of Ignacio López de Zárate Vargas y Gaitán, Madrid, July 11, 1803, Protocolo 23.011, Archivo Histórico de Protocolos de Madrid. Don Ignacio, who died in 1804, named as his heir the only surviving child of his first marriage, don Isidro López de Zárate y Gamarra. On the chapel of San Isidro, which took its present form in the 1850s, see Pérez Balsera, *Laudemus viros gloriosos*, 112–16.