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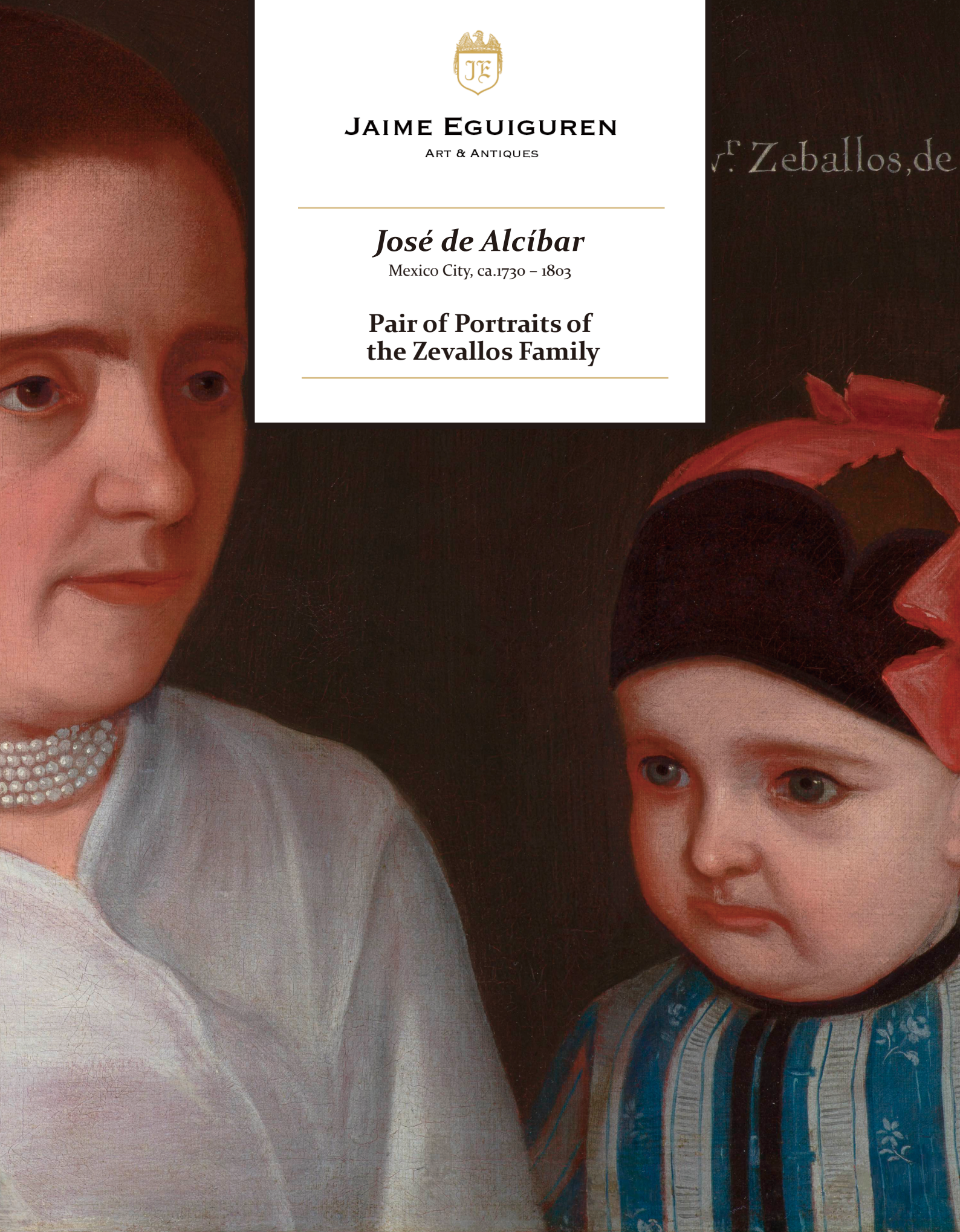
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J. Zeballos, de

José de Alcívar

Mexico City, ca.1730 – 1803

**Pair of Portraits of
the Zevallos Family**



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José de Alcívar

Mexico City, ca. 1730 – 1803

Pair of Portraits of The Zevallos Family

Oil on canvas
58 x 97 cm, each

Provenance: Private Collection, Italy

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



Sofía Fernández Lázara

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Not much is known to date about the life of José María de Alzibar, who is thought to have been born much earlier than 1751, the date on which he signed his oldest known painting. According to his will, he was born in Texcoc, a city seven leagues to the east, facing to the north of Mexico City. The legitimate son of Juan de Alzibar and Teresa de Mirandad, he was the youngest of four: Anastasio, Antonio, Anna and José María. We also know he was single and had no children, though he took care of his nephews and nieces. His family must have moved to the capital city of New Spain when he was very young, which gave him access to the main painting workshops in the city, where he died on 18 February 1803.

As with other New Spanish painters, art history scholars have not devoted a great number of studies to the life and works of this Mexican painter, with only a few references to his artistic skills. As we can gather from his own will, José de Alzibar was a painter and art teacher, whose activity spanned the second half of the 18th Century. According to Bernardo Couto in *Diálogos de la Pintura*, Alzibar is acknowledged as “the last great master of New Spanish painting”¹, to which Inmaculada Rodríguez Moya adds that Alzibar was “considered an excellent painter of his time, specialising in portraits.”² José de Alzibar’s facet as a portrait painter is worth highlighting and taking a look at since “given the predominance of religious themes, it must have been difficult for artists to devote themselves to portrait painting almost exclusively”³, a hypothesis with which Vargas Lugo agrees, adding that “given the prevalence of religious paintings, painters didn’t have the technical resources to suitably paint earthly faces [...] added to the fact that, on most occasions, portraits were carried out post mortem or based on a verbal description.”⁴ Toussaint considers Alzibar to have an artistic discernment that was higher than the average at the time since, although his religious painting has all the same faults of other similar paintings of the era, his portraits reveal the true artist, pointing out his portrait of Sor María Ignacia de la Sangre de Cristo⁵ as his masterpiece [Fig. 1]. This painting showcases Alzibar’s skills, his preference for the modelling of faces, his command of drawing and attention to detail, which is especially obvious in his rendering of clothing.

Similarly, there aren’t many references to his initial training. Although some sources state that “José Alcibar, [was] a student of Ibarra and worthy competitor of his master, his work never lacking in precision as regards to drawing and in tenderness as regards to colour”⁶, this hypothesis hasn’t been proven. It can be stated, however, that Alzibar knew of Ibarra’s work and may have even met him in

1 COUTO, Bernardo: *Diálogos sobre la historia de la Pintura Mexicana*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1979, p.108

2 RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, Inmaculada: *La mirada de los Virreyes: iconografía del poder en la Nueva España*, Castelló de la Plana, Universitat Jaume I, 2003

3 WALTER PALM, Erwin: “Introducción al arte colonial” in *Cuadernos Americanos*, 16/92:2, Mexico, 1957, pp. 158-167.

4 RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, Inmaculada, *Op. Cit.* 2003, p.80.

5 TOUSSAINT, Manuel: *Arte colonial en México*, UNAM, Mexico, 1962, p.171

6 VILLA, Agustín F.: *Breves Apuntes sobre la Antigua Escuela de Pintura en México y algo sobre escultura*. Alfonso Toro (pro. y not.), Mexico, printed in the home of “Don Quijote”, 2nd Ed., 1919, p.53

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

person through Miguel Cabrera, of whom he was a student; in Alzibar's own words: "Miguel Cabrera was someone I knew, dealt and communicated with, and helped for many years, someone with whom I experienced great professional satisfaction. I always considered him a gentleman, an ingenious, simple and reliable man." Oquendo stresses Cabrera's role as master, bringing Alzibar closer to painting through theory, technique, the scriptures and anything that involved reflecting on brushwork.⁷

Even if his initial links to Cabrera's workshop can be established, his technical evolution and success, however, was further enhanced through the Mexican Painting Academy, founded in 1753. This relationship with academic circles offered endless visual references that would end up defining his style, with a more flowing brushstroke clearly present in the first half of the 1780's, probably influenced by the works of the Madrid court painter Andrés Ginés de Aguirre.

Considered a transitional painter between the Baroque and Neoclassical eras, it is highly likely that Alzibar started his own workshop somewhere between 1760 and 1770, as he was already painting series and altarpieces, which he would have been unable to carry out without help from collaborators or apprentices, and the support of specialists in other areas. His activity as a painter was long-lasting and prolific, with outstanding work. Despite the influence of Miguel Cabrera, Alzibar provided a personal style to his images, as this original pair of portraits show. Conceived as an official portrait, they present the Zevallos family, documented as the most powerful family in 18th-century Córdoba. We can easily imagine this pair of portraits hanging on the walls of the family palace built in the 18th century, where the Treaty of Córdoba that declared Mexico's independence from Spain was signed in 1821. The building is now destroyed almost completely, but its original stone portico, known as Portal de Zevallos, is a national historic monument.

As regards the description of these works, we can see how Alzibar designed a family portrait divided into two medium-sized canvases, a compositional format unknown in the Mexican painter's catalogue until now. The first of these presents the family matriarch with the youngest son and daughter: Manuela, aged 3, and Francisco Javier, aged one year and 8 months, presented on a dark background with no decoration other than the three characters' figures. The mother appears at the centre of the composition, a bust in a semi-profile position, averting her gaze from the viewer. Her long brown hair is tied back in a ponytail, her pale face completely in view. Her countenance is serious, lacking expression, as was the custom in Viceroyalty portraits. Her long, bushy eyebrows dominate the face, forming a disguised arch that ends at her long nose, almost button-like at the tip. Her almond-shaped eyes share the same tone as



Fig. 1 José de Alzibar, *Maria Ignacia of the Blood of Christ*, 1750 – 1803, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional de Historia, México.

⁷ FLORES GARCÍA, Karina Lisette: *El quehacer artístico-social de un pintor novohispano: José de Alzibar*, México D.F., 2013, p.20

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

her brown hair, in contrast to the subtle red of her lips, thin and shut tight. As with many other female portraits of the time and place, the mother sports a fake beauty mark or *chiqueador* on her right temple, like a large mole used for both therapeutic and aesthetic reasons [Fig. 2]. Highlighting the ostentatious role that this type of painting plays, aiming to showcase one's wealth, the woman is heavily adorned with jewels: a pair of white gold or silver earrings decorated with diamonds and three large tear-shaped pearls, on her neck a choker with five rows of small pearls. Alzibar has impeccably portrayed Hispanic modesty, denying the viewer a glimpse of the protagonist's bosom, which is veiled by an organdie shawl, her only visible garment.

Manuela Zeballos, aged 3, appears to the left of the composition. A semi-profile bust portrait, the girl is wearing a lovely blue head scarf, tied at the centre and which supports her long copper-coloured mane. Like her mother, her face is fully visible, her large blue eyes prominent and in contrast to her small nose and mouth. She also sports a *chiqueador*, a choker with three rows of pearls and reddish gems that could be rubies. Matching the jewel on her neck, she's wearing pearl earrings, with tear-shaped pearls that match the organza fabric that shapes her dress, completely white except for two blue strips centred on her chest.



Fig. 2 Anonymous artist from New Spain, Lady's Portrait, 18th century, oil on canvas. Franz Mayer Museum

Finally, the youngest in the family, Francisco Javier Zeballos, aged one year and eight months, appears to the right of the painting. His posture is similar to the others', but this time facing in the opposite direction. His head is covered by what looks like a black velvet bonnet with red bows that have jewels at their centre. Like his sister, he has large, beautiful eyes, though grey in his case, that almost suggest he may be about to burst into tears. The infant is wearing an elegant jacket decorated with alternating vertical white and blue stripes.

The second of the paintings being studied here shares the same composition and aesthetic. At the centre of the composition is the oldest of the Zeballos progeny, Anna María, aged 19. Again, a semi-profile bust portrait, Anna María is wearing a bow with white and grey stripes and red speckles tied at the centre of her head. Her hair is perfectly tied up, her long face in full view, with prominent almond-shaped, brown eyes crowned with two thin, arched eyebrows. She has inherited her mother's long, buttoned nose and thin lips that slightly droop at the sides. She is wearing a *chiqueador* on her left temple and a set made up of a choker and dangling earrings adorned with emeralds. To her left we find José Antonio, aged 10. The young boy is portrayed as a young adult, wearing a red cassock with blue lapels. Inscrutable, in profile and facing his sister, José Antonio is wearing a brown wig with a black velvet bow, in the style of French portraits. His face, in full view, shares features with his family members. His somewhat sad-looking eyes are dark grey, in stark contrast to his intensely red lips, also closed. A black velvet choker on his neck contrasts with his white shirt.

Lastly, to the right of the composition we find María Anna Zeballos, aged 9. Hers is the kindest face of all. She is wearing a red and white headscarf, holding her also reddish hair. Her eyes, a light grey, are

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

filled with emotion, her nose and mouth not as prominent. She is wearing a beautiful choker that has two rows of small pearls, crowned at the centre by a larger, tear-shaped pearl. Her dangling earrings also include emeralds and pearls. Like her older sister, and in keeping with the modesty expected from her class, the only garment visible is a white organza fabric that covers the entirety of her portrayed body.

Both these works, signed by Josephus ab Alzibar in 1778, are a rarity among the artist's compositional repertoire and are a magnificent example of New Spanish family portraiture, in which children gradually stop being small adults, becoming creatures halfway between childhood and adulthood, their clothing still mimicking that of the older members. The colours chosen are still the reds symbolising power, blacks symbolising authority, and dark tones linked to trade and money, and also include, from the 18th century onwards, the blues and lighter tones introduced by the French Bourbons.

These two paintings we are presenting here are another example of the social recognition the painter had garnered by the 1770's⁸, becoming a highly sought-after artist. Beyond his technical skills, it was his involvement in recognised groups such as guilds and third orders, where he established the networks that would gain him recognition and boost his production⁹, providing him with an extensive portfolio of distinguished clients both in the world of religion [Fig. 3] and in civil society. In the sphere of religious portraiture, his work carried out for Archbishop Haro y Peralta, or the bishop of Sonora, Fray Damián Martínez de Galinsoga, are of particular note, as well as his work housed in the Museo Michoacano of Morelia, where his portrait of Fray Antonio de San Miguel, painted in 1786, is on display. As regards his civil portraits, Alzibar also received commissions from important political personalities in New Spain, like Viceroy Antonio María de Bucarelli y Ursúa, whose portrait he would sign in 1774 [Fig. 4], María Josefa Bruno or Martín de Mayorga, currently in the Prado Museum [Fig. 5].



Fig. 3 José de Alzibar, *John of Nepomuk*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Andrés Blaisten Collection



Fig. 4 José de Alzibar, *Patronage of Saint Joseph over the Viceroy Don Antonio María de Bucarelli y Ursúa*, 1774, oil on canvas

8 FLORES GARCÍA, Karina Lissete: *Op. Cit.*, 2013, p.33

9 *Ibid*, p.7

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES



Fig. 5 José de Alzibar, *Don Martín de Mayorga*, 18th century, oil on canvas. Museo Nacional del Prado

The real turning point in the history of Viceroyalty portraiture, as well as continental portraiture, would have to wait, however, until the end of the War of Spanish Succession. With the victory of the Bourbons, and the appearance of liberal and enlightened thinking in the Frenchified court, a new version of portraiture introduced by French artistic trends would soon extend across the neighbouring Spain and its overseas territories. Historical and commemorative portraits, which had until then adorned palace halls, were abandoned in favour of a new aesthetic model, to which Marita Martínez del Río refers as *ostentatious portraits*.¹⁰ The aim of this type of lineage gallery was to document the grandeur of the depicted figures; their titles, the positions they had held, and their lavish lifestyles.

Portraits were the privilege of the privileged, given from conquest to independence, to speak of portraits necessarily means to speak of the depiction of the elite. The portrait genre executed in these territories was reserved, in practice, to figures whose political and social relevance merited being documented.¹¹

There is a probable causal link between an increasingly globalised world fully immersed in economic liberalism, the economic expansion of the Viceroyalties, an increase in the number and power of the *criollo* population, and their need to disseminate their image as a way to start building (and recording) a defining cultural identity as *criollo* elite¹². This new feeling of identity, a sort of Latin-American proto-nationalism, explains the reviving of portrait art in the Indies. It is this historically and socially-based casuistry, removed from any stylistic motivations or justifications, that begs us not consider Viceroyalty portraits “as having the same existential artistic value that is defined for academic-naturalistic portraits.”¹³ In this regard, Rodríguez Moya masterfully states that “even if looking for authenticity, the aim wasn’t to portray their nature but to reveal their social, political or religious position.”¹⁴

This new art was still subject to Spanish and European cultural standards overall, but was understood in a new, indigenous light at the end of the 18th century. This light filtered out any imported style and adapted it to the demands of a growing *criollo* taste that had nothing to do (or wished it didn’t) with the geographical and human framework that defined its past. And so, new colonial portrait art integrated some of the influences received from European painters, such archaism becoming an identifying feature of New Spanish (and later Republican) portraiture.

10 MARTÍNEZ DEL RÍO DE REDO, Marita: *Baroque mystique: women of Mexico-New Spain seventeenth and eighteenth centuries*, México, 1994, p.54.

11 RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, Inmaculada: *Op. Cit.*, 2001, p.79.

12 KATZEW, Ilona, “La irradiación de la imagen: la movilidad de la pintura novohispana en el siglo XVIII”. en *Pintado en México, 1700-1790: Pinxit Mexici*, coord. Ilona Katzew. Cat. Exp. Los Ángeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; México: Fomento Cultural Banamex, A.C., 2017.v

13 VARGAS LUGO, Elisa: “Una aproximación al estudio del retrato en la pintura novohispana” en *Anuario de Estudios Americanos*, 1981, p.671.

14 RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, Inmaculada: *Op. Cit.*, 2001, p.80.

JAIME EGUIGUREN

ART & ANTIQUES

José de Alzibar took on the new artistic currents he had access to during his stay at the Mexican Painting Academy, an institution that disseminated the precepts of French enlightened liberalism. That is how the work carried out at his and other workshops laid the foundations for an identifiable tradition of its own at the end of the 18th century, a tradition demanded by an emerging ruling class¹⁵ in need of covering the walls of their homes with portraits of their most distinguished representatives.

The emerging colonial portrait was a far cry from imported European portraits, in which gentrification translated into the “idealisation of the person, looking for a more human and sensitive depiction, representing people as persons capable of enjoying activities such as horse riding, music or nature.”¹⁶ Latin-American Viceroyalty portraits, on the other hand, “didn’t try to reproduce the person depicted with a level of psychological penetration but, instead, sought to reveal certain personal aspects, in particular their belonging to a social group, religious community or corporation”¹⁷, with no interest in the characteristic features of their existence and with a stereotypical composition and expression, with generalised facial features that moved away from any natural portrayal. That is how portraits became a mirror of civilisation, a useful witness for reconstructing any changes in spirit, values and mentality of the New Spanish society.”¹⁸

We may conclude that this pair of works by Alzibar, without any known precedents as regards to composition and design, and displaying magnificent technical skill, work as a social and psychological X-ray of the Zevallos family and their environment. Although they present two pictorial portraits, that is, two artistic works open to being understood on their own aesthetic merits, the aim here isn’t just to enjoy and comment on them but to read into them, in the same way as historians read into any written text.

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15 FORTES GONZÁLEZ, Nelly: *El retrato femenino en México del barroco novohispano al nacionalismo de 1920. Una lectura desde la sociología de la distinción de Pierre Bourdieu*, Universidad de las Américas Puebla, Mexico, 2007, p.25.

16 RODRÍGUEZ MOYA, Inmaculada: *Op. Cit.*, 2001, p.80.

17 Ibid, p.80.

18 PÉREZ VEJO, Tomás and QUEZADA, Marta Yolanda: *De novohispanos a mexicanos. Retrato de identidad colectiva en una sociedad en transición. Catálogo de la exposición*, Mexico, Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2009, p.14.

D.^o José Ant^o Zeballos, de edad de 10, años. D.^{ña} Anna Maria Zebal^os de edad de 18, años. D.^{ña} Maria Anna Zebal^os de 8, a.^os.



Portrait of the artist

D.^{ña} Manuela Zeballos, de edad de 3, años.

D.^o Fran.^{co} Xav.^r Zeballos, de año, y 8, meses.

