



December 2011



Santa Barbara

ca. 1680-1690

Unidentified Puerto Rican Artist

oil on wood panel

10 7/8 x 8 1/4 in. (27.6 x 21.0 cm.)

Smithsonian American Art Museum

Teodoro Vidal Collection

1996.91.9

[Collections Webpage and High Resolution Image](#)

American Art Museum researcher Laura began her sleuthing with the earliest artwork in the museum's collection. Rather than being painted on paper or canvas, this artwork was made on a wooden panel by an unknown artist. What can our researcher find out about this artwork? After observing the work in person, researcher Laura formulated the following questions:

- **Who would have owned this object during the seventeenth-century? Who would have created such an object? What was its purpose?**

With so much research on this artwork having already explored the iconography found in the work, as well as the story of Santa (Saint) Barbara, I was curious to explore some of the surrounding contextual information with the preceding questions. I began my search fairly routinely by consulting library catalogs and applying a variety of search terms to obtain the materials I thought would best aid my search. As my avenue of research dealt with the contextual history of the island of Puerto Rico, I also consulted the Smithsonian's own National Museum of American History. The museum ended up providing me with a wealth of helpful information. I discovered that during the seventeenth-century, "Puerto Rico had very few priests. This made the establishment of church ritual and other rules very difficult, especially in remote areas. Rural Puerto Ricans consequently created their own distinctive religious observances and practices. They often worshipped at home." (National Museum of American History) Bad roads through

mountainous terrain and long distances between communities also hindered the ability to attend church. (Diaz, 1986) The fact that Puerto Ricans at the time worshipped at home also serves to explain the small size of the artwork. As it was small, it would have fit perfectly in a small space devoted to prayer. If necessary, it was also incredibly portable.

But who would have created an object like this? At first glance it does not appear to have been created by a sophisticated, trained artist. It has a certain folk art quality to it, though the artist has correctly depicted Saint Barbara's attributes and iconography, indicating some knowledge of the subject. I found answers in a book on Puerto Rican *santeros*, or "saint-makers." I knew of the word *santero* through researching another work in the permanent collection of the Smithsonian American Art Museum; [*Our Lady of Guadalupe*](#). *Santeros* created objects called *santos*; these were essentially devotional folk artworks. Additionally, there are different types of *santos*; one type is called a *retablo* and is a devotional image painted on wood, while the other type is called a *bulto*, a carved wooden sculptural figure.

To discover exactly who would have owned an object such as this, I figured that I would need to consult various volumes on the history of Puerto Rico. I learned that at the time this work was created the population of the island of Puerto Rico, while small, was incredibly diverse. "The population of Puerto Rico was still relatively small – no more than 3,000 people. Ethnically it was made up of several hundred whites, close to a thousand black slaves and over a thousand free blacks and mulattoes. . . . [However], its elite was small and, compared with the elites of cities such as Mexico, Lima, Panama, and Potosi, poor." (Lopez, 1980) For various economical reasons, it became increasingly difficult for the wealthy landowners to obtain imported goods, like European made devotional images. Spain no longer viewed Puerto Rico as economically viable as some of their other territories. Accordingly, records indicate that only a handful of Spanish ships made it to the island in any given year. This created a market for the *santero* to produce locally-made images for the landowners who needed them. While not professionally trained as artists with background knowledge in religious imagery, *santeros* would have had access to traditional Catholic iconography via prints of religious artworks that arrived on the island. Because of the great disparity between the wealthy and the slave class, it becomes clear that the only type of person that could have owned an object like *Santa Barbara* was a landowner. Even though the object was most likely locally made, a freed slave would not have had the means to afford this type of private devotional object.

To understand the historical context of this artwork better, I would like to further explore the history of Puerto Rico with the following question:

- **What was happening in Puerto Rican history at the time this work was created? What different types of people lived on the island? How did this mix influence the culture of Puerto Rico?**

Selected Bibliography:

Diaz, Irene Curbelo de. *El Arte de los Santero Puertorriqueños: The Art of the Puerto Rican Santeros*. San Juan, Puerto Rico: Instituto de Cultura Puertorriqueña and Sociedad de Amigos del Museo de Santos, 1986.

Lopez, Adalberto, editor. *The Puerto Ricans: Their History, Culture, and Society*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, Inc, 1980.

National Museum of American History. "A Vision of Puerto Rico: The Teodoro Vidal Collection." Accessed December 10, 2011. <http://americanhistory.si.edu/vidal/about/?id=2>