

Keys to rescue *El Dorador*, a Lost Chronicle of José Martí

David Leyva-González
Philologist and Essayist
Centro de Estudios Martianos
Cuba

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Abstract

El Dorador is the title of a lost chronicle of José Martí. The Cuban poet, before going to war, asks his secretary and friend Gonzalo de Quesada to rescue this text from his abundant stationery. However, neither Quesada nor the multiple editors Martí has had for more than a century have been able to fulfill this request. The present study offers some clues that bring us closer to this mysterious chronicle. Progressively, we are closer in pleasing the Martian desire before his passing in the fields of Cuba.

Keywords: José Martí; Latin American thought; art critics

Resumen

El Dorador es el título de una crónica perdida de José Martí. El poeta cubano, antes de marchar a la guerra, le pide a su secretario y amigo Gonzalo de Quesada que rescatara este texto de su abundante papelería. Sin embargo, ni Quesada ni los múltiples editores que ha tenido Martí por más de un siglo han podido complacer este pedido. El presente estudio muestra algunas pistas que nos acercan más a esta misteriosa crónica. Cada vez estamos más cerca de complacer el deseo martiano antes de morir en los campos de Cuba.

Palabras clave: José Martí, pensamiento latinoamericano, crítica de arte



As a faithful writer of modernity, José Martí was a follower of the model of Charles Baudelaire, in which a poet, with his sensitivity and culture, can write about the topic he likes, and establish during his creative process, all possible correspondences without excluding the arts or sciences. They are complete artists who in their wide creative range dedicated time and space to write about painters and works of art. In the case of Martí it is curious to see how on the eve of marching to war, in his legendary known as letter-testament to Gonzalo de Quesada, he remembers to publish three of his most famous art criticisms (that of the Russian painter Vereschagin, Hungarian Muckacsy, and of French impressionists); he also mentions a text titled *El Dorador* that continues to be a mystery in Martí's work, because neither Quesada himself nor editors after him, have been able to find this chronicle that he so wanted to leave for posterity¹.

Regarding this lost text there exists an outlined theory made by Fina García Marruz, who associates *El Dorador* with the life of Miguel de Cervantes y Saavedra. The Cuban writer, as indicated

by one of his articles on Enrique José Varona, of 1888, read the vicissitudes of Cervantes in Algiers, which were studied by Don Nicolás Díaz de Benjumea in his book *La Verdad sobre el Quijote*², as well as in the annotated edition of *El ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha* by Benjumea of 1880.

Therefore, Martí, not only receives the literary model of the great Spanish novel, but also learns of a heroic Cervantes, described by Benjumea, who made three escape attempts throughout his years in captivity, all frustrated by betrayal. The first failure came from a Moorish guide that left him after the first day of the journey, and in the remaining occasions, he was betrayed by two of his own countrymen, one of them called *El Dorador*. Therefore, Fina García Marruz exhibits:

1 "You will most likely be in a hurry to make no more than one volume of the material from the 6th. The *Dorador* could be one of your articles, and another Vereshagin and a review of the Impressionist painters, and the Christ of Muckacsy." (Montecristi, 1 de abril de 1895. José Martí. *Obras Completas*. Editorial Ciencias Sociales, 1975, v. 1, p. 26)

2 «And Cervantes ... ¡Ah! Cervantes is not like that prodigious Lope de Vega and vile of the shamelessness letters to that women, nor spokesman for the glories of his King Felipe, who was not as described by Núñez de Arce and Moüy, but as depicted by Gachard and Motley and our Güell: Cervantes is really as detailed in Benjumeas *La verdad sobre el Quijote*, and in the *Alonso de Quijano* itself, with the goodness of a saint who had Panza for penance, as is shown: Cervantes is, in the faultless study of the Cuban writer, that early friend of the man who lived in dark times for freedom and decorum, and with the sweet sadness of genius preferred life among the humble than the courtly habits, and is both the delight of letters and one of the most beautiful characters of history. » (José Martí, *Obras Completas*, v. 5, p. 120)



This fact (referring to the attempt to escape from Algiers) also appears in the prologue of a new Spanish edition of the works of Cervantes, which Martí had occasion to read, where the name of the spy who betrayed the captives revealed as “El Dorador”, to whom he would dedicate a chronicle and gave some importance, since in the instructions he would later give his future editor and friend, Gonzalo de Quesada, he asks him not to exclude this chronicle, when Quesada omits to mention his other important chronicles and not even mention his novel.³

However, the mention of *El Dorador* in the letter-testament is made in a context of art criticism, so it is not convenient to think that this lost text is dedicated to this sinister character linked to Cervantes’ misfortunes. Martí himself gives us light in this regard when writing at the beginning of a chronicle dating February 1887:

Mr. Director of *La Nación*:

All has been debates, differences and anger in this month of January. Perhaps the only amiable events were the public session of the excellent school of indians of Carlyle, in which both civilizations

are fusing with a certain poetic color, and the exhibition of Rembrandt’s *El Dorador*, a truly majestic bourgeois (O.C. v. 11, p. 153).

Knowing then, that the chronicle is based on a work by Rembrandt, and that it was written at the beginning of 1887, it is surprising that when reviewing the list, in Spanish, of the paintings of the Dutch artist there is none under the title *El Dorador*. There only appears a work titled *El hombre con yelmo dorado* [The Man in the Golden Helmet] (figure 1). At this point, we could again recall the theory of Fina García Marruz, because it is the portrait of an impressive soldier dressed in XVI and XVII century war garments, a time when Miguel de Cervantes himself was a soldier, but again the incongruity arises, since it is considered that this extraordinary portrait was not made by Rembrandt but by one of his three disciples who helped him in his workshop in Amsterdam. The work was never exhibited in New York, it went from the Netherlands to London, in the context of the Second World War it was much admired by Adolf Hitler, and today it is exhibited in a museum in Berlin.

3 See Fina García Marruz. “La canción del camino” In: María Teresa León. *Cervantes el soldado que nos enseñó a hablar*. La Habana, Editorial Gente Nueva, 2005, p. 184. (In Spanish)



**Figura 1. The Man the Golden
Helmet**



Gemäldegalerie, Berlín. Alemania.
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/
The_Man_with_the_Golden_Helmet](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Man_with_the_Golden_Helmet)

I then modified the paintings search term, instead of looking up the word “Dorador” I used its equivalent in French and English, the languages most known to Martí besides Spanish. Thus, more concrete and reliable results appeared. For example, in a New York Times article dated February 19, 1885, entitled “Rembrandt’s *Gilder*” (Dorado in Spanish), a report is presented of the sale to a mysterious “American Banker” of a famous Rembrandt painting called “Le Doreur” that belonged to the Duke of Morny in Paris. For that year, it

was the best paid work of art in the United States and it was the first great Rembrandt painting that arrived in New York. Formerly, the Rembrandts of the Duke of Westminster existed, none, however, comparable to this portrait. Immediately after its arrival *El Dorador* ended up in the hands of William Schaus, the most important art dealer in New York at the time of Martí who without hesitation allowed the state of opinion to run but did not organize the exhibition of the piece until December 28, 1886 as reflected in the news header of the New York Times “Holiday Arts Show”, announcing the exhibition of the famous Rembrandt on December 17, 1886, and “A painted masterpiece” that reviews the exhibitions’ opening day on December 28 of that year. Martí views the art piece in the month of January and his impression is such that he writes a chronicle in those initial months of 1887.

When reviewing the catalogs of the Metropolitan Museum of New York it is discovered that the Rembrandt known as *Le Doreur* during the XIX century is the *Retrato de Herman Doomer* (1595-1650), with which title is presently known (figure 2). At the beginning of 1640 an oil on wood was painted with dimensions 75.20 by 55.20 cm. The dealer Schaus later sold the painting to millionaire H.O. Havemeyer and upon his passing, it was instituted into the collection of the Metropolitan Museum where it is exhibited in Gallery 618.



Figure 2. Portray of Herman Doomer



Rembrandt, New York Metropolitan Museum.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herman_Doomer

Doomer was the most renowned manufacturer of frames, gilder, and ebony carver during Rembrandt's time. Between them prevailed a friendship and work relationship. Both Herman Doomer and his sons worked not only in the fabrication of frames but in the construction of ebony drawers and table cabinets that are still valued and auctioned. It is no wonder that many of the works of Rembrandt's most important creative stage were framed in this family workshop. According to

the *Enciclopedia Universal Ilustrada Espasa-Calpe* volume XVIII second part 1995, one of Herman's sons, Lamberto Doomer, abandoned the paternal workshop to devote himself to art and was welcomed as a disciple of Rembrandt, and achieved merit and prestige under the aegis of the master.

There are three theories of why during the XIX century the art piece was called *El Dorador*. One is that in Paris the Doomer surname was corrupted to Doreur and the other more credible theories are that the title comes from Doomer's fully mastered profession as a gilder or from the beautiful golden light projected by the portrait that without being intense or tenuous catches the attention of the spectator.

Martí could have spoken about all this in his chronicle. However, the writers of the *New York Times* of those years showed little historical knowledge of the portrait and focused their interest in the formal finish of the art piece and details concerning its market value that caused the oil painting to arrive in New York. When Martí recalls this text in 1895 he remembers it in company of his most perfected writings on art for *La Nación* of Buenos Aires between 1886 and 1889, so surely this chronicle was sent to Argentina for dissemination, but as it also happened with his text on the inauguration of the Brooklyn bridge in



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1883, the publication was not approved for unknown reasons. In the case of the text on the Brooklyn bridge Martí then chose to disseminate his legendary text in *La América* of New York. By 1887 a similar magazine to *La América* was *El Economista Americano* and in it Martí had voice and vote to diffuse whatever he pleased.

In the *Anuario del Centro de Estudios Martianos* [Yearbook of the Center for Studies on José Martí] number 2, 1979, it is shown that one of the few found numbers of *El Economista Americano* in the National Library of Cuba, specifically from October 1888, presented a thematic correlation with four known *La Nación* texts, which is why I fervently believe that if the 1887 February, March or April numbers ever appear, some of their pages will contain the lost chronicle of José Martí. According to researcher James F. Shearer in his work "*Periódicos españoles en los Estados Unidos*" (*Revista Hispánica Moderna*, New York, no. 1-2, January-April 1954), *El Economista Americano* is one of the extinct publications of United States libraries, and for this reason, as recommended by researcher Enrique López Mesa, it is best to focus the search in American Spanish-speaking countries to which Martí sent journal issues from New York.

However, more recently, thanks to the aid of the meticulous researcher Ricardo

Luis Hernández Otero, it is known with certainty that the elusive chronicle was published in March 1887 in *La América* of New York, a number that unfortunately has not been found -until now- in Cuban libraries. This fact was discovered by Hernández Otero in the Cuban newspaper *El País*. Notice the qualification used to highlight the quality of the magazine, specifically, Martí's art critics over the other texts of the index:

La América. Monthly magazine of industry, commerce and general Hispanic-American interests. - *La América Publishing Co.*, N. York, 16, Beaver St.- Annual subscription, \$3.

Indeed, we are struck by the fact that this beautiful magazine is not more popular among us, which can be considered the cheapest of its kind and at the same time the most beautiful from the material point of view. It is a luxuriously covered notebook, of 54 pages, greater than those of *La Ilustración Española*, of satin paper, and abundant engravings of overall very good quality. Its main purpose was to promote trade between North and South American countries by making the prodigious industry of the United States known through pen and chisel.

This magazine also has a literary component of great importance: it is under the direction of our dearest friend Diego V. Tejera. To judge the diligence



and suitability with which he runs the magazine, we provide below the summary of the last March issue:

“On the intervention in the policy of public employees. -Mormonism. -Children protection. -Henry W. Beecher. -The source of the Mississippi. -The last German elections. -Rembrandt’s *El Dorado* (beautiful article by José Martí). -The immortals of France. -A page on fiscal history. -The native town. -The true character of Emerson. -The hectare. -Sugar industry. -Scientific and industrial notes. -A bit of everything. -The genius and calculus, novel by D.V.T. -The immortal muse, poetry by G. Zéndegui.”

Obvious advantages, then, are offered by this publication to subscribers, without counting the fact that each issue is accompanied with pages of a good novel; the currently featured novel is titled *Días Oscuros [Dark Days]*, by Hugh Conway, the author of *Misterio... [Mystery...]*, for which the company will give a luxury binding once it is totally published.

We recommend this magazine with pleasure and we wish for it to circulate in this country as well as in South America, Mexico and Central America. It is worthy of it.

(*El País*, 10 (98): 2, April 28, 1887, column 5). (In Spanish)

Because I started discussing about the poetic sensitivity and the comments

made by Fina García Marruz about *El Dorador*, I would like to conclude in the same way. Rembrandt masterfully painted his friend, the gilder, Herman Doomer in the 40s of the XVII century, Doomer’s face reflects, without doubt, friendship and joy.

However, *El Dorador* was not an isolated piece of art but part of a diptych of equal dimensions which also portrayed Doomer’s wife and companion named Baertjen Martens (figure 3). Upon *El Dorado*’s passing, his widowed wife asked his son Lambert Doomer, due to his knowledge of Rembrandt’s style, to commission a copy of the portraits for his own brothers that; to this day such copies are kept in museums in Germany and Netherlands. Unfortunately, over the years, the originals abruptly parted separate ways: *El Dorador* went to New York where it was admired by Martí from which stemmed the cited writing of 1887; meanwhile the wife portrait ended up in the Hermitage Museum of St. Petersburg.



Figure 3. Portray of Baertjen
Martens



Rembrandt, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portrait_of_Baertje_Martens

The curious thing is that both Martí and Fina, at different periods and times, were attracted by the faces of both portrayed paintings that belong together. Martí, in the XIX century, dedicated a chronicle, which is still missing, to the slim face with hat and cloak; and Fina, unconsciously, timidly and briefly, writes a small poem while admiring El Dorador's wife, as if herself were speaking to Rembrandt:

“Yes, if you want,
if you insist, I will pose
for you, but only
for an hour, I do not have
too much time, just
for one hour!”
She said conceding
willingly lips
for all eternity
that good lady Baertjen
Martens Doomer. (García Marruz, 2010, p. 421)

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