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A detailed still life painting by Antonio Ponce. The composition is set against a dark, textured background. In the lower left, a silver tray holds several round, golden-brown pastries and a few red, elongated sweets. To the right, a woven basket is filled with green grapes, a pear, and a cinnamon stick. A large, dark red apple sits prominently in the center-left. A glass of red wine is visible in the upper left corner. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the fruit and the reflective surfaces of the tray and glass.

Antonio Ponce

Still life with a basket of fruit and a tray of sweets

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ANTONIO PONCE

(Valladolid 1607 – Madrid 1677)

STILL LIFE WITH A BASKET OF FRUIT AND A TRAY OF SWEETS

Oil on canvas

43.8 x 77.7 cm; 17 1/4 x 30 5/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Spain.

Reference bibliography

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Antonio Ponce was one of the main artists who dominated the field of still-life painting in Madrid, part of the second generation of specialists who consolidated the genre in accordance with the artistic tastes of courtly elites. Together with Francisco Barrera, and having been formed on the work of Juan van der Hamen y León in the 1620s, Ponce developed towards compositions of a more theatrical character. Although he was born in Valladolid, he moved with his family to Madrid during childhood, since his father was in the service of the Duke of Peñaranda.

He is the only pupil of Van der Hamen for whom documentary evidence survives attesting to his presence in the master's workshop. He entered it in 1624, when the painter of Flemish origin was at the height of his career. Their relationship also extended into the family sphere, since Ponce married one of Van der Hamen's nieces. In artistic terms, that connection is clearly apparent in his earliest works, which depend closely upon the prototypes of his master. He must have collaborated personally on Van der Hamen's final works and, after the latter's death in 1631, continued his own career with a particular focus on still lifes, although there is also evidence that he painted portraits and religious images.

During the 1630s and 1640s Ponce occasionally contributed to decorative schemes for the court, sometimes in collaboration with the other major still-life painter of the period, Francisco Barrera, who was likewise a follower of Van der Hamen. His works, however, were above all sought after by a prosperous clientele, whether noblemen or bureaucrats in the service of the Spanish Habsburgs. In these years he developed an abundant production, progressing towards more personal formulae. Alongside series involving considerable workshop participation, devoted to allegorical representations of the months and seasons of the year, in those compositions entirely by his own hand he deployed a distinctive repertoire of vegetal elements. A singular use of soft, somewhat ashen tones, combined with others that are almost golden, at times together with a rigorous attention to detail in the drawing, produces a highly characteristic harmony in his still lifes.

The present still life, composed of two elements placed on a ledge or sill, relates to works signed by Ponce in the 1640s, both in the correlation of masses with differing silhouettes and in the arrangement itself, as well as in the traditional device of the stone surround. At the same time, the scheme goes back to the dual arrangements used by Van der Hamen, in which trays, boxes, earthenware vessels and metal plates were combined. Although in the present work Ponce did not copy any motif from his master's repertoire exactly, the basket with grapes, pears and figs certainly recalls the sumptuous baskets painted by Van der Hamen.

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The bunch of grapes hanging over the rim, as well as the alternating upward and downward disposition of the pear stalks, are close to his solutions. Even the finishing detail of a turned fig leaf, bell-shaped in form and with its stem raised vertically, appears in some of Van der Hamen's baskets. Above all, however, the metal tray with sweetmeats and a long-necked bottle containing sweet wine, perhaps muscatel, refer to one of his master's specialities, for Van der Hamen was particularly celebrated for his paintings of sweets. The most famous example is the *Still Life with Sweets and Glass Vessels* of 1622 in the Museo del Prado (fig. 1).

This still life in fact belongs to an intriguing chain of related works, involving several artists, at least two of whom made use of the same models, presumably devised in Van der Hamen's workshop and subsequently adopted by his followers. A pair of still lifes was recently sold at Christie's, London, one of which employed these same elements (fig. 2). That work was dated 1643 and signed by an artist hitherto little known, Domingo Pérez, active in Madrid between 1635 and 1661, who is documented in connection with Juan de Solís. Apart from certain minor details, the elements used are the same - the basket and the tray - and their arrangement is almost identical. The differences in handling between the two examples, however, are very clear. The present painting does not display the pronounced chiaroscuro of Domingo Pérez's work. Instead, the combination of at times firm drawing with velvety textures and greyish tonalities is more characteristic of Ponce's practice. The same may be said of the way in which the reflections are achieved on the pewter of the tray, here with greater luminosity. The detail that best corroborates the different authorship is the placement of the tray itself, here positioned on the edge of the ledge, casting a marked shadow across the front plane, clearly visible to the viewer. This impression of instability recurs as a constant in Ponce's work, whereas Pérez appears to have opted for a more balanced presentation.

At least two other compositions are known in which these motifs were used, giving some measure of their diffusion in Madrid around 1640. A large still life with two baskets and a tray of sweets, now in a Sevillian collection, repeats them once again on the viewer's left. The photographic archive of the Instituto del Patrimonio Cultural Español preserves a photograph of another canvas in which the distinctive basket is used as the central motif, with a more extensive radial spread of leaves and, in principle, closer to the art of Ponce. The present work therefore plays an important role within this chain of analogies. It documents Antonio Ponce's involvement in the process and brings into focus his impact on the dissemination and evolution of Spanish still-life painting in the mid-seventeenth century.

Dr. Ángel Aterido

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Fig. 1. Juan van der Hamen y León, *Still Life with Sweets and Glass Vessels*, 1622, oil on canvas, 52 × 88 cm, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, inv. P-01164.



Fig. 2. Domingo Pérez, *Still Life with a Basket of Fruit and a Tray of Sweets*, 1643, oil on canvas, 55.2 × 84.3 cm, Madrid, private collection.

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