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Josefa de Ayala y Cabrera, called Josefa de Óbidos
Pair of still lifes with desserts, fruits and flowers

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JOSEFA DE AYALA Y CABRERA, called JOSEFA DE ÓBIDOS
(Seville c. 1630-1684 Óbidos)

PAIR OF STILL LIFES WITH DESSERTS, FRUITS AND FLOWERS

Oil on canvas
110 x 70 cm; 43 1/4 x 27 1/2 in (both)

Provenance

Gamero Cívico collection, Seville, 1949;
Private collection, Barcelona.

Literature

R. Torres Martín, "Algo sobre los discípulos y seguidores de Zurbarán", *Revista de estudios extremeños*, vol. 20, no. 1, 1964, pp. 443-444.
V. Serrão, *Josefa de Óbidos e o tempo barroco*, Lisbon 1991, p. 71 (reproduced).

Exhibitions

Lisbon, Galeria do Rei Dom Luis, *Josefa de Óbidos e o tempo barroco*, 1992.

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We are grateful to Joaquim Oliveira Caetano for having confirmed the attribution of the present paintings to Josefa de Óbidos.

Josefa de Ayala, commonly known as Josefa de Óbidos, is one of the few documented professional women artists of early modern Iberia, and arguably one of the most celebrated painters of the Portuguese baroque.¹ She received her training in Coimbra under the tutelage of her father, the Portuguese painter Baltazar Gomes Figueria (1597-1674). She came to Portugal in 1634 when her father returned with the family to his native country, settling in the town of Óbidos. Subsequently, Josefa stayed for a few months in the Augustinian convent of Santa Ana in Coimbra while her father painted the altarpiece of the Colegio de Nossa Senhora da Graça, however there is no evidence that she planned to enter religious life.

She returned to Óbidos in 1653 where she earned her own living as a painter, receiving commissions mainly from religious institutions, but also producing works for private devotion. A small city, Óbidos was conveniently located between Lisbon, the capital, and Coimbra, the site of an important university. When she was 29 years old, she received her parents' permission to be a "Donzela emancipada," an emancipated woman, unmarried and independent from her family.² By the 1660s she was one of the main still-life specialists in Portugal and, remarkably for a woman of her time, maintained an independent workshop, supplying religious orders and urban collectors.³ Approximately 150 works of art have been attributed to Josefa de Óbidos, making her one of the most prolific Baroque artists in Portugal.⁴

The formal qualities and ideology of her paintings are closely related to contemporary Andalusian painting of the period. This tendency is especially evident in her still lifes, which draw influence from Zurbarán (to whom this pair had been previously attributed), yet often exhibit a vibrant quality that is evident in the present works.⁵ Moreover, one can notice the influence of the Flemish and Dutch schools, which Josefa de Óbidos adapted to her Naturalist genre to create her own distinct style. Her typical vivacity is often achieved through the incorporation of delicate floral elements meticulously rendered with a high degree of precision and detail. The use of vibrant hues and rhythmic patterns further enhances the exuberance that characterises her artistic style.

After her death, publications about Portuguese artists celebrated her and marvelled at the novelty of a woman artist. For instance, in his 1696 treatise on painting, Félix da Costa Meesen counted Josefa among the most important Portuguese artists, writing that she was

¹ See the new monograph on the artist by Carmen Ripolles, *Josefa de Óbidos (Illuminating Women Artists)*, Chicago 2025.

² E. N. C. Zarur, "A Forgotten Woman Artist in the Seventeenth-Century Europe: Ayala's 'The Case of Josefa' and the Art of Portugal," *Encruzilhasas = Crossroads*, vol. 8, 2008, pp. 81–89.

³ L. Schipsi, A. Nelson, V. Serrão et al. *The Sacred and the Profane: Josefa de Óbidos of Portugal*, exh. cat., Lisbon/Washington, D.C., Ministério da Cultura, Gabinete das Relações Internacionais; National Museum of Women in the Arts, 1997, p. 34.

⁴ See Schipsi et al. (1997).

⁵ Several of Francisco de Zurbarán paintings were included in inventories of her father's, uncle's and sister's properties. See V. Serrão, in *The Dictionary of Art*, London, 1996, Vol. 2, p. 878.

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“acclaimed far and wide, especially in the neighbouring countries...”⁶ Josefa's œuvre is today represented in leading collections. Many of her still-life paintings, considered her specialty, are now preserved in the Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga (Lisbon), the Museu de Évora, the Museu Nacional Machado de Castro (Coimbra), the Walters Art Museum (Baltimore) and the National Museum of Women in the Arts (Washington, D.C), which held the retrospective *The Sacred and the Profane: Josefa de Óbidos* in 1997. Since the 1970s, spurred by the pioneering scholarship of Vítor Serrão, Luís de Moura Sobral, and Joaquim Oliveira Caetano in Portugal, and Edward J. Sullivan in the United States, and reinforced by a series of landmark exhibitions, Josefa de Óbidos has been decisively reappraised. Archival work and fresh methodologies attentive to gender, global exchange, and material culture have reframed her practice. She now stands as a central figure of the Portuguese Baroque, fully engaged with the artistic, religious, and political urgencies of her time: one of early modern Portugal's most distinctive, prolific, and original painters.

Each of the present two still lifes is arranged on a fictive stone ledge before a dark, voided background that dramatizes the objects' plastic presence. In the first composition, a wicker basket brimming with red cherries is flanked by a terracotta jug and some fresh cheeses poised on a glass stand; fern fronds, lilies and pink carnations interweave the edible forms, softening their geometry. The companion canvas replaces fruit and dairy with conventual sweets: chocolate-glazed sponge, some small cream pastries nested in lace-edged candid linen, sugar-coated candies and raspberries, accompanied by a twisted-handled red clay ewer. Scattered petals and a hovering butterfly create subtle vectors that bind the twin tableaux. Josefa's controlled lighting, descended from Sánchez Cotán, isolates each object yet unifies the ensemble through delicate reflected highlights. The restrained chromatic range, dominated by earthen reds, whites and light browns, is punctuated by the saturated crimson and pink of the carnations.

One can find a similar arrangement, with an identical red/black jug and the wicker basket full of cherry in her 1679 *Cesta com Cerejas, Queijos e Barros*, today in a private collection (Fig. 1). A very similar jug and identical glass stand featuring in our paintings can be seen in Josefa's *Natureza Morta com flores, doces e cerejas* (1676) now at the Museu Municipal de Santarém (Fig. 2). Both works confirm the same tendency of mixing tableware and food with botanical elements. Further corroboration of her reemployment of the same objects as props in different paintings comes from the c. 1670 *Natureza Morta com Bolos e Barros* (Fig. 3) and the 1660s *Natureza-morta com caixas, copo e floreira de cerâmica* (Fig. 4) where one can see comparable glass and silver stands. The newly acquired *Fruit Still Life* at the Meadows Museum in Dallas provides a further point of comparison, especially with regard to the treatment of light and the compositional scheme (Fig. 5)

⁶ As reported in F. da Costa and G. Kubler, *The Antiquity of the Art of Painting*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967.

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Fig. 1. Josefa de Ayala, *Cesta com Cerejas, Queijos e Barros*, 1679, oil on canvas, private collection.



Fig. 2. Josefa de Ayala, *Natureza Morta com flores, doces e cerejas*, 1676, oil on canvas, Museu Municipal de Santarém.

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Fig. 3. Josefa de Ayala, *Natureza-Morta com Bolos e Barros* and detail, c. 1670, oil on canvas, Palácio Nacional da Ajuda.



Fig. 4. Josefa de Ayala, *Natureza-morta com caixas, copo e floreira de cerâmica*, c. 1660s, oil on canvas. Lisbon, Museu Nacional de Arte Antiga

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Fig. 5. Josefa de Ayala, *Fruit still life*, c. 1680, oil on canvas. Dallas, Meadows Museum.

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