

LUIS EGIDIO MELÉNDEZ
(Naples 1716-1780 Madrid)

STILL LIFE WITH A PLATE OF GRAPES, MELONS, AND APPLES

oil on canvas

41.5 x 61.5 cm; 16 1/3 x 24 1/4 in.

Provenance

Rosendo Naseiro Collection, Madrid.
With Caylus, Madrid, 1993-94;
Private collection.

Literature

E. Tufts, *Meléndez. Eighteenth Century Master of the Spanish Still Life*, Columbia 1985, p. 183, reproduced fig. 77.

J. J. Luna, 'Novedades y cuadros inéditos de Luis Meléndez', *El arte en tiempo de Carlos III*, Jornadas de Arte. Departamento de Historia del Arte "Diego Velázquez", Madrid 1989, p. 373.

J. J. Luna, *Los alimentos de España en la pintura de bodegones de Luis Meléndez*, Madrid 1995, cat. no. 14, reproduced p. 85.

P. Cherry, *Luis Meléndez. Still-Life painter*, Madrid 2006, cat. no. 127, p. 548, reproduced p. 507.



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Luis Meléndez is recognised as the major Spanish still-life painter of the 18th century and one of the most outstanding masters in this genre anywhere. Born in Naples in 1716 into a Spanish family, he was the son of Francisco Meléndez, the Royal Miniaturist painter, and the nephew of Miguel Jacinto Meléndez, a portraitist at the court of Philip V of Spain.

The family returned to Madrid in 1717, where he would receive an artistic education from his father until he became the apprentice of Louis Michel van Loo, the Royal Painter of Phillip V. In 1744, the Royal Academy of Painting in Madrid was founded (which would later become the Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando in 1753) and Francisco Meléndez was made an honorary director of the painting department. Luis was one of the first students to be admitted, and from the beginning proved to be outstanding. The young artist gave expression to this hopeful moment in his remarkably assured *Self Portrait* (**Fig. 1**), signed and dated 1746, now in the Musée du Louvre, Paris, where he is depicted holding what may be one of his prize-winning academy drawings. However, his academic training would soon come to an end. Francisco quarrelled with the Director of the Academia and wrote a defamatory letter of resignation which he then published and had his son deliver in person. As a result, Francisco was relieved of his teaching position, while Luis was expelled from the Academia.

Francisco paid for his son's obligatory trip to Rome so he could complete his artistic training. Luis stayed in Italy for four years, visiting Naples where he was received by Charles VII (the future Charles II of Spain) who seemed to be pleased with the young man's efforts as a painter. Luis returned to Spain late in 1753 to assist his father on the illumination of a new set of royal choir books, which are judged to be amongst the best examples of Ferdinand VI's patronage. As a result, he made his first of four unsuccessful petitions for court preferment. It was difficult to find work as a painter in Madrid without official commissions; Luis would have had to rely on private clients to make a living, and he may have turned to still lifes because such works were relatively easy to sell. Indeed, still lifes would seal his professional fate, and also secure him the lasting fame which he enjoys today.

Meléndez's situation changed dramatically early in 1771 when he was received by the Prince of the Asturias (the future Charles IV) and his wife Maria Luisa of Parma. The prince commissioned an extensive series of still lifes to decorate his cabinet of natural history.¹ By January of the following year, the artist had delivered most of the

¹ Meléndez's still lifes never actually hung in the Prince of Asturia's Natural History Cabinet in the Royal Palace. Instead, they were displayed in the Casita del Príncipe, his country retreat near the Escorial, before being moved to the Palace of Aranjuez at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The series is now distributed between the Prado and other Spanish museums.

pictures – forty-four in all – for the cycle, qualifying him as one of the greatest of the 18th century painters in this genre. Meléndez had hoped to receive a pension, but his proud nature again frustrated any plans for a secure future. In 1776, he quarrelled with court officials over money, and the commission was terminated despite the ‘high opinion which Meléndez has of his own merit and his work’.²

This beautiful still life serves as a testament to Meléndez’s masterful craftsmanship. Arranged simply on a wooden table are two melons, a bunch of grapes on a silver platter, and three apples, all forming a balanced composition dominated by spherical shapes of various sizes. Like his contemporaries - Jean-Baptiste Chardin in France and Carlo Magini in Italy - Luis Meléndez favoured simple food items and everyday objects in his art. His interest lay in exploring the abstract, geometrical possibilities of still life, diverging from the extravagant displays typical of the late Baroque and Rococo fantasy. Meléndez’s deliberate and sophisticated spatial arrangement of simple shapes, coupled with subtle interplays of solids and voids, render his work profoundly appealing to modern viewers. Indeed, from the lens of modernist formalism, his work echoes the aesthetic preoccupations of avant-garde twentieth-century artists like Cézanne, Picasso, and Braque. This piece also highlights Meléndez’s adeptness at capturing the distinct characteristics of everyday items. His fascination with textural contrasts is evident in the depiction of rough melon rinds juxtaposed with the smooth, shiny grapes, as well as the silver platter atop the scratched wooden table. Each element showcases different surfaces, allowing Meléndez to display the full range of his artistic skill and repertoire.

The melons depicted here also appear in a signed picture by the artist, slightly smaller and in vertical format, housed today in the Alte Pinakothek, Munich (**Fig. 2**). While most of Meléndez’s variant paintings relate to the cycle of still lifes commissioned in 1771 by the Prince of Asturias - regarded by the artist to be the ‘cabezas de la obra’ - this is not the case here. Neither of the paintings is dated, but the artist seems to have favoured painting in a horizontal format later in his career.

The present painting was owned by the Spanish collector Rosendo Naseiro, who during the second half of the 20th century assembled the greatest collection of Spanish still lifes known in living memory. The importance of his collection is attested by the fact that in 2006 some forty of his Spanish still lifes were acquired for the Museo del Prado, an event celebrated in an exhibition held at the museum entitled *Lo Fingido Verdadero: Bodegones españoles de la colección Naseiro adquiridos para el Prado* (24 October 2006 - 7 January 2007).

² This 1778 judgement by Court officials is quoted by Peter Cherry, ‘Luis Meléndez and the fruits of a frustrated career’, in P. Cherry et. al., *Luis Meléndez. Still Lifes*, exh. cat., Dublin 2004, p. 22



Fig 1. Luis Meléndez, *Self-portrait*, oil on canvas, 119 x 82cm, signed and dated 1746, Paris, Musée du Louvre.



Fig. 2. Luis Meléndez, *Still life with melons, quinces and plums*, oil on canvas, 49.8 x 37.4cm, signed, circa 1765-1770, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.

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