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ANDRÉS DE LEITO

(Documented in Segovia and Madrid between 1656 and 1663)

STILL LIFE OF SKULLS

c. 1650-60

oil on canvas

38.5 x 78 cm (15 1/8 x 30 6/8 in)

Provenance

Private collection, Italy.

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We are grateful to José Gómez Frechina, José María Quesada Valera, and Ángel Aterido for endorsing this painting's attribution to Andrés De Leito.

Within the still life genre of the Spanish Golden Age, the *Vanitas* stands out for its symbolic value and moral message. These compositions, often filled with symbols for decay and death (skulls, hourglasses, extinguished candles), emphasise the futility of worldly pursuits and the omnipresence of death in a society beset by political and economic crises, stricken by wars, famines, and the plague. Spanish artists such as Antonio de Pereda, Francisco Palacios, Juan de Valdés Leal, Tomás Yepes, Juan Francisco Carrión, Francisco Velázquez Vaca or Francisco Camilo, and Andrés De Leito were all prolific in the genre.

This exquisite canvas by De Leito, recently rediscovered by scholarship, is a *unicum* in the Spanish *Vanitas* genre. Six skulls are presented without their mandible; three of them in the foreground show their cranial base with anatomical precision while the other three, placed on a more distant plane, rest directly on their upper jaw. The focussed side light conceived by the painter creates subtle plays of light and shade on the hollows of the skulls, especially on the nasal cavities, eye sockets, and zygomatic arches.

There is little information available to outline the biographical and artistic profile of Andrés De Leito — also known in the sources as Deleito — who is documented in Segovia and at the Madrilenian court between 1656 and 1663, the year in which he made his will, by which we know that he was married to Úrsula de las Heras. It can be inferred from the will that Andrés De Leito had family property in the Madrid town of Valdemoro, where his wife was also baptised. The scholar Juan Agustín Cean Bermúdez noted that De Leito lived in Madrid around 1680, a fact that has not been confirmed by the documents of the time.

We know that De Leito painted a series for the cloister of the convent of the observant Franciscans in Segovia (now lost), and that he still claimed some payments in his will. In addition to painting religious themes, De Leito must have specialised in still-life paintings, which were popular with the painter's contemporary clientele, judging by the reference made by the Cordovan painter and treatise writer Acisclo Antonio Palomino de Castro y Velasco (1655-1726) when speaking of Castilian painter Mateo Cerezo: "he also painted small still-life

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paintings, with such superior excellence, that none of them surpassed him, if any equalled him; even those by Andrés De Leito, who painted them excellently in this court”¹.

With its dissolved, fluid technique and loose brushstrokes, the present painting bears a close resemblance with De Leito’s *Vanitas* (oil on canvas, 107 x 155.5 cm) in the Legion of Honor Museum, San Francisco (Fig. 1), as well as the pair of *Vanitas* in the collection of the Dukes of the Infantado in Madrid (Figs. 2 and 3), and two other paintings on the same theme in the Márquez de la Plata collection and in the former Blanco Soler collection.

The silent, timeless character of the bone structures depicted in this unusual composition with no spatial or time frame is in keeping with the sombre, funerary context that must have governed the conception of this chilling painting, perhaps intended by its theme and context for the *De Profundis* room of a monastic community, where the corpse of the recently deceased monk was watched over by his brothers of faith before being buried. This skull-ridden picture would have undoubtedly helped the participant’s meditation and empathy on the vacuity of human life and the need for the salvation of the soul.

This unpublished painting by Andrés De Leito, both captivating and suggestive, is unique amongst the varied collection of Spanish Baroque *Vanitas*. Its extreme, forthright simplicity and the way it prioritises the implicit message and the conceptual elements bring this painting close to modernity as few others do.

¹ Antonio Palomino, *El Parnaso español pintoresco laureado*, in *El Museo pictórico y Escala óptica* [1796], Madrid 1947, p. 978

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Fig. 1. Andrés De Leito, *Vanitas*, ca. 1660.
Oil on canvas 107 x 155.5 cm (42 1/8 x 61 1/4 in.)
San Francisco, Legion of Honor Museum.

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Figs. 2, 3. Andrés De Leito, *A pair of Vanitas still lifes*
Oil on canvas, each 64.6 x 77.5 cm
Madrid, Dukes of the Infantado collection