

Caylus



BARTOLOMÉ PÉREZ DE LA DEHESA
(Madrid, 1634-1693)

Pair of floral still lifes

Ca. 1680
Pair of oils on canvas
60 x 112 cm

Signed: the first, “Bme. Pérez. f” at the lower left corner; the second, “Bme. Perez. f” at the lower right corner

RELATED LITERATURE:

CALVO SERRALLER, F. *Flores españolas del Siglo de Oro. La pintura de flores en la España del siglo XVII*. Museo del Prado, Madrid, 2002.

JORDAN, W. B., CHERRY, P. *El bodegón español de Velázquez a Goya*, Ediciones El Viso, 1995.

CHERRY, P. *Arte y naturaleza: el bodegón español en el siglo de oro*, Ediciones Doce Calles, Madrid, 1999.

ATERIDO, A. *El bodegón en la España del Siglo de Oro*, Edilupa Ediciones. Madrid, 2002

ROMERO ASENJO, R. *El bodegón español en el siglo XVII: Desvelando su naturaleza oculta*, Icono I&R, Madrid, 2009.

Bartolomé Pérez de la Dehesa was an exceptional painter from Madrid who is principally known for his floral paintings. These take the form of compositions of varying degrees of complexity featuring fresh, eye-catching and real and natural flowers which fill the canvas with a sense of dynamic life in their studied disorder. The blooms are arranged in baskets and vases as well as on ledges, or in some cases take the form of garlands framing an interior scene, usually of a religious subject. A large number of works by the artist have survived, evenly distributed across his career in terms of their chronology. The dated works allow for an appreciation of Pérez’s aesthetic and technical evolution, which reflects a widespread Baroque tendency in its progression from the relatively restrained to the more exuberant and is also marked by increasing technical refinement.

Pérez de la Dehesa initially trained with Andrés de la Torre, of whom nothing is now known, then completed his apprenticeship with Juan de Arellano, the most important flower painter of the Spanish Golden Age. As was habitual at this period and in a reflection of the collaborative context which fostered beneficial family and professional relations, in 1663 he married his master’s daughter, Juana de Arellano. They had seven children of whom the eldest also became a painter.

Despite documentary references to a large number of religious works by the artist, less of these have survived. Pérez was also known for his decorative painting, including those executed for the triumphal entry of María Luisa de Orleans, and for his set designs for the Buen Retiro and Alcázar palaces which have not survived due to their ephemeral nature. In 1689 Pérez was made honorary court painter, a distinction that indicates the exceptionally high esteem in which he was held given that he primarily

painted flowers. Following this distinction, he embarked on the series of 55 vases of flowers painted on panel with gold backgrounds (a rare format in Spain) for Charles II's "Gilded Bedchamber" in the Alcázar, an opulent structure that housed the monarch's bed.¹ Although still life was considered a lesser genre at this period, Palomino devoted space to Pérez in his *Vidas*, referring to him by the honorary title of "Don" and praising him for the fact that he "succeeded in painting flowers as well as his father-in-law", while also describing him as "extremely amiable, of delightful character and very well equipped for anything."² Palomino states that Pérez de la Dehesa died after falling from scaffolding while painting frescoes in the palace of the Duke of Monteleón, aged 59.

During the second half of the 17th century flower painting in Spain reached a peak of maximum splendour. Until that period the country had imported compositions of this type from both the Flemish world and Italy and it was thus a market saturated with important works. Artists such as Arellano and Pérez soon grasped the potential and benefits offered by the genre, which had been little employed by Spanish painters but which was appreciated by an expanding, upper-class clientele interested in acquiring decorative, pleasing and simply beautiful works.

The logical influence of Arellano on Pérez's output is clearly evident, but in terms of technique it co-exists with others derived from Italy, with clear echoes of Mario dei Fiori, Margarita Caffi, Giuseppe Recco and Giovanni Paolo Spadino. Pérez's paintings, which are of notable technical perfection, employ a fluid brushstroke, warm chromatic ranges and pronounced chiaroscuro.

The present two canvases form a pair of ambitious and decorative floral compositions and undoubtedly reflect the artist's intention to introduce innovation and inventiveness into still lifes of this type. They employ a pronounced horizontal format characteristic of over-door or over-window paintings for which Pérez arranged groups of flowers of different species alongside a variety of recipients arranged on a stone ledge. In the first canvas a blown glass vase with metal mounts houses a floral arrangement, together with another cluster of flowers seemingly placed at random in front of a costly gilt-bronze ewer decorated with a mythological scene of Pan and Syrinx. Its pair includes a bronze ewer decorated with another mythological scene, which may depict Venus with some putti, the ewer lying on its side on an orange tablecloth edged with gold thread.

¹ Two from this series are in the Museo del Prado (P06396 and P06397).

² PALOMINO, A. *Vidas*, ed., Nina Ayala Mallory. Madrid, Alianza Forma, 1986, pp. 315-316.

Next to it is another group of flowers arranged in an informal, asymmetric manner, in this case in a wicker basket of broad weave which clearly brings to mind those painted by Pérez's father-in-law Arellano. The plain, dark background, carefully devised illumination and chromatic rhythms of white, reds, pinks and yellows give rise to extremely beautiful and splendid compositions in which tulips, peonies, narcissi, roses, anemones, pinks, knight's spur and other flowers coexist in overflowing opulence.

These canvases can be closely related to the series of over-window compositions painted by Mario Nuzzi for the Buen Retiro palace, now in the Museo del Prado (fig. 1), executed between 1640 and 1642. Pérez, who owned two floral still lifes by Nuzzi according to the inventory compiled on his death, must have known those works and was capable of reinterpreting them in his own manner with enormous skill.



Fig.1 Mario Nuzzi. *Silver vase of flowers overturned on a tablecloth*. 1640-42. Oil on canvas, 84 x 152 cm. Museo del Prado (P000252)