

# COLNAGHI



Master of Stirling-Maxwell,  
Still Life with Basket of Fruit, Melon and Grapes, *c. 1615-1625*

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MASTER OF STIRLING-MAXWELL  
(Toledo, active c. 1610-1640)

## *STILL LIFE WITH BASKET OF FRUIT, MELON AND GRAPES, 1615-1625*

Oil on canvas.  
66 x 82 cm; 26 x 32 1/4 in.

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Provenance

Private collection.

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Literature

W. B. Jordan and P. Cherry, *Spanish Still Life from Velázquez to Goya*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995, pp. 32-33, fig. 19.

A. Marí, F. Q. Corella, J. Y. Gaso et al. *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, exh. cat., Barcelona 2015, pp. 42-44 and p. 125, reproduced.

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Exhibited

Barcelona, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, 9 October 2015 - 28 February 2016.

On long-term loan to the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya until 2024.



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Assembled upon the shallow ledge of a fictive window, this *bodegón* presents a meticulously ordered array of produce that appears at once casual and studied. Centrally positioned is a wicker basket overflowing with figs and dark grapes, its rim aligned with the horizontal axis of the sill to anchor the scene. Flanking this fulcrum, four sun-blushed peaches rest directly upon the stone ledge, their velvety surfaces subtly catching the raking light.

Suspended above, and thus isolated against the tenebrous background, hang a sequence of provisions secured by slender cords: first a string of scarlet peppers; then two compact clusters of grapes whose dusty bloom is rendered with jewel-like precision; and finally, a modest *cucurbita* - in fact a spaghetti-squash variety, mistakenly identified by some writers as a melon. The lower right corner, a space that several contemporaries might have left void, is animated by a pair of cardoon blossoms, their spiny bracts protruding beyond the pictorial plane and reinforcing the illusion of tangible depth.

By depicting fruit kept cool in a dim interior and suspended for preservation, the painter declares his commitment to unvarnished naturalism. Yet this ostensible straightforwardness also serves two strategic ends. First, it affords the artist an opportunity to parade his technical prowess in the rendition of surface, weight and translucency. Secondly, it functions as a calculated appeal to contemporary taste: early-seventeenth-century patrons valued such ostensibly ingenuous compositions, in which Nature seemed neither idealised nor arranged to flatter courtly splendour.

The present canvas reprises, on a slightly reduced scale, a work of identical subject (104 × 79 cm., private collection, Fig. 1) attributed to the same anonymous hand. Although at first glance the two appear near-replicas - the constituent objects occupy broadly corresponding positions - closer scrutiny reveals significant divergences. The larger version admits more breathing space between the suspended bunches of grapes and the central basket, thereby loosening the compositional tension and, arguably, diminishing the viewer's sense of trompe-l'œil immediacy. Such contrasts suggest that the smaller painting may well constitute the preliminary statement, its more compressed format heightening the theatrical impact.

In its formal language the still life is unmistakably indebted to Juan Sánchez Cotán: the orthogonal windowsill, the dramatically lit void behind the objects, and, above all, the motif of produce hanging by cords attest to the Castilian master's enduring influence. That very idiom, disseminated through Cotán's pioneering panels, underpins the early development of still life within central-Spanish circles and informs the compositions of later practitioners.

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One discerns the same lineage, for example, in canvases attributed by Peter Cherry and William Jordan to Juan van der Hamen - *Basket of Peaches, Figs and Hanging Bunches of Grapes* (formerly Naseiro Collection) and *Still Life in a Kitchen* (Marquis and Marchioness of Marañón Collection) - as well as in Miguel de Pret's signed *Still Life with Basket of Figs, Basket of Plums, Melon and Hanging Fruit* (Juan Abelló Collection).

Seen in this light, the present *Still Life with Basket of Fruit, Melon and Grapes* shows the Master of Stirling-Maxwell taking Cotán's model and adjusting it to his own ends, tightening the composition and giving it a balanced, vivid presence that quickly found favour with collectors.

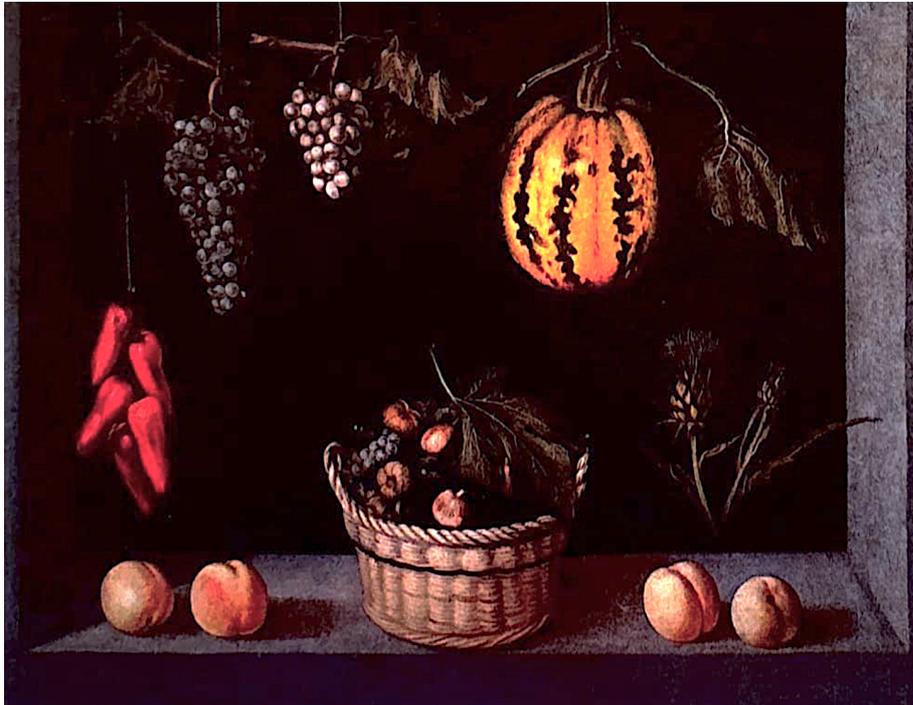


Fig. 1. Master of Stirling-Maxwell, *Still Life with Basket of Fruit, Pumpkin and Peppers*, oil on canvas. Private collection.

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