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A still life painting by Luis Egidio Meléndez. The composition is dominated by a large, central pile of golden-brown, braided sweet rolls, possibly brioche or similar pastries, which are rendered with soft lighting and visible texture. To the left, a wooden honey pot (a shallow, bowl-like container) is partially visible, showing its curved form and a small handle. To the right, a tall, cylindrical ceramic honey pot stands upright, decorated with a repeating pattern of blue floral motifs. The background is dark and indistinct, focusing attention on the objects. The overall style is characteristic of the 18th-century Spanish still life tradition, emphasizing texture and light.

Luis Egidio Meléndez

*A Dessert Still Life with Sweet Rolls, Jelly Boxes
and Two Honey Pots*

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LUIS EGIDIO MELÉNDEZ
(Naples 1716 – 1780 Madrid)

A DESSERT STILL LIFE with Sweet Rolls, Jelly Boxes and Two Honey Pots

Oil on canvas
36.8 x 49.2 cm; 14 1/2 x 19 3/8 in.

monogrammed at lower right: *L.M*

Provenance

The Infante Don Sebastián Gabriel Borbón y Braganza (1811 – 1875);¹
Thence by descent to his son Don Luis de Borbón y Borbón, Duque de Ansola (1864 – 1889);
Thence by descent to his son Don Manfredo de Borbón y Bernaldo de Quiros (1893 – 1979), Duque de Hernani;
Thence by descent to a European noble private collection;
By whom offered for sale, London, Christie's, 7 July 2004, lot 74 (where unsold and then acquired by private sale by the present owner).

Literature

J. Cavestany, *Floreros y bodegones en la pintura española*, Madrid 1936-40, p. 161 & plate LXV, no. 2;
'La Galleria de Pinturas de S.A.R. el Sermo. Señor. Y infante Don Sebastián Gabriel', in M. Agueda Villar, 'La colección de pinturas del infante Don Sebastián Gabriel', *Boletín del Museo del Prado*, III, 8 May – August 1982, p. 109, no. 90;
J. J. Luna, *Luis Meléndez, bodegonista español del siglo XVIII*, exh. cat., Madrid 1982, reproduced on p. 30;
E. Tufts, 'Luis Meléndez, Still Life Painter sans pareil', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, VI, C, 1982, p. 160, no. 66, reproduced;
L. C. Gutiérrez Alonso, 'Precisiones a la cerámica de los bodegones de Luis Meléndez', *Boletín del Museo del Prado*, XII, 4, 1983, p. 166;
E. Tufts, *Luis Meléndez: Eighteenth-Century Master of the Spanish Still Life with a Catalogue Raisonné*, Columbia 1985, p. 99, no. 73, reproduced on p. 181;
J. J. Luna, *Los alimentos de España en la pintura: bodegones de Luis Meléndez*, Madrid 1995, no. 30;
P. Cherry, in P. Cherry et. al., *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, exh. cat., Madrid 2004, pp. 196-98;
P. Cherry, *Luis Meléndez: Still Life Painter*, Madrid 2006, pp. 53-54, fig. 36, pp. 91, 165, 186, 538, reproduced in colour on p. 453, cat. no. 73.

Exhibited

Madrid, Palacio de la Biblioteca Nacional, *Floreros y bodegones en la pintura española*, May 1935, no. 82;
Madrid, Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, *Tesoros de las colecciones particulares madrileñas*, May – June 1987, no. 87;
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, 17 February – 16 May 2004, no. 21;
Lisbon, Museu Calouste Gulbenkián, *The Object Observed. Five Centuries of European Still Life Painting*, 15 October 2009 – 3 January 2010.

¹ In whose collection this still life is recorded in 1835 as in the 'Pieza de despacho' (the study) of his Picture Gallery: '90. Otro en id. (canvas) de 1 pie y 4 1/2 pulgadas de alto, por 1 pie y 9 1/2 pulgadas de ancho. Hay en el unos trenzados unas cajas de dulces y dos tarros de lo mismo. Está restaurado por Bueno y tiene marco tallado y dorado....Luis Melendez (firmado)'.

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The accession to the throne in Spain of the Bourbon dynasty by Philip V and his descendants in the early eighteenth century led to a gradual revival of the arts in that country. Major commissions were at first given to foreigners, usually French or Italian, but this began to change with the establishment of the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando for the training of native artists in 1752 and the opening of similar institutions in the provinces. The pace of renewal quickened when Charles III succeeded Ferdinand VI in 1759. The new King founded several royal manufactories, like those he had inaugurated in Naples, which nurtured the talents of local artists, such as Francisco Goya, who became one of the greatest Spanish painters of all time.

Although the teachings of the Academia were intended to promote a grand official manner for the decoration of churches and palaces, secondary genres, including that of the still life, which had been dominated by foreigners in the earlier part of the century, also received encouragement. Luis Meléndez – the last great exponent of the Spanish still life tradition – benefited from this new climate.

Born in Naples, Meléndez returned as an infant to Spain with his parents in 1717. His father, Francesco Antonio, enjoyed a flourishing career as a painter of miniatures for the Court and for the nobility, and by 1725 had attained the title of *Pintor de miniature de la casa real*. Francesco Antonio had petitioned Philip V to establish an academy as early as 1726, and he was appointed honorary director of painting when Ferdinand VI founded the provisional *Academia* in 1744. Luis Meléndez was among the first students admitted, achieving outstanding results in drawing. The young artist gave expression to this hopeful moment in his glamorous *Self Portrait* (fig. 1), signed and dated 1746, now in the Louvre, where he is depicted holding what may be one of his prize-winning academy drawings in red chalk. He seemed destined for a glittering career – then disaster struck. His father quarrelled with the Director of the Academia over a silly question of precedence. He wrote a defamatory letter of resignation which he then published and had his son deliver in person. As a result, Francisco Antonio was relieved of his teaching position, while Luis was expelled from the Academia. Official favour was never to smile on him again.

Francisco Antonio paid for his son's obligatory trip to Rome. 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'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. He had, in fact, already used whimsical still life details for some of the illuminated capital

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letters of the choir books of 1753-58. His first known *Still life* dates to 1759, and already shows the fundamental characteristics of his mature style.

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.² By January of the following year, the artist had delivered most of the pictures – forty-four in all – for the cycle, qualifying him as one of the greatest of the eighteenth-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'.³

This seemingly unassuming *Still life* of dessert comestibles has been judged to be among the artist's most attractive works.⁴ The studied artlessness of the composition is, in fact, belied by the sophistication of its spatial organisation, where a subtle displacement of solids and voids imparts a series of opposing vertical thrusts within the closely cropped, horizontal picture plane that is characteristic of Meléndez. Dr Peter Cherry compares this compositional method to that employed by Juan van der Hamen (1596 – 1631) in his dessert still lifes, for example the one in the Museo de Bellas Artes, Granada.⁵ Eleanor Tufts dates the present work to 1770-71, that is just before the artist's meeting with the Prince and Princess of the Asturias.⁶

In a similar way to his contemporaries – Jean-Baptiste Chardin in France and Carlo Magini in Italy – Luis Meléndez used simple foods and homely objects in his paintings because, like them, he was interested in the abstract, geometrical possibilities of still life composition, rather than in the magniloquent displays of the late Baroque or Rococo fantasy. Therefore, the same comestibles and artefacts reappear in more than one of the artist's crowded, complex canvases. The tilted, wooden jelly boxes included in the present work are a recurring motif in his work, and the sweet rolls are found in a more elaborate *Dessert still life* in a private collection.⁷ The shorter honey pot from Biar or Lucena (with a green glaze around its neck) in the present picture also features in the *Still life with limes, a box of jelly, a butterfly and vessels* in the

² 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.

³ This 1778 judgement by Court officials is quoted by P. 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.

⁴ P. Cherry, in P. Cherry et. al., *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, exh. cat., Madrid 2004, p. 196, cat. no. 21.

⁵ Cherry et. al. 2004, *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, fig. 97.

⁶ See *Literature*.

⁷ Reproduced in Cherry et. al. 2004, *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, cat. no. 22.

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Prado (fig. 2),⁸ while the taller slender one (with blue flower like markings) from Manises in Valencia is of a type often repeated in Meléndez's work, although with different colours and decoration.⁹ An unusual feature of this *Dessert still life* is that it is painted on a reused canvas, having originally been intended to serve as a support for a double portrait of Ferdinand IV and his Queen, Barbara of Braganza. Meléndez turned the canvas upside down and painted the present picture, just as he did with the *Still life with oranges and walnuts* in the National Gallery, London (fig. 3), which has an unfinished portrait of Charles III underneath it.¹⁰

Because the present *Dessert still life* belonged to the Infante Don Sebastián Gabriel Borbón y Braganza (1811 – 1875) as early as 1835, when it is listed in an inventory of his paintings, it has been suggested that he may have inherited it from his great uncle Charles IV and, therefore, that it could possibly be one of the 'four or five' canvases by Meléndez that the then Prince of the Asturias owned prior to commissioning the others. The Infante Don Sebastián Gabriel was an enthusiastic collector who added to the paintings which he had inherited, both by marriage and acquisition. Although his preferences were for classic Spanish paintings of the Golden Age, he owned works by Goya and other still lifes by Meléndez, as well as the latter's celebrated *Self Portrait* in the Louvre. He was also a painter in his own right and championed young Spanish artists. In 1837, the Infante's possessions were confiscated for political reasons, and his paintings were exhibited in public. His collection was returned to him shortly before his death. What, like the present picture, was not sold in the auctions of 1876, 1890 and 1902, remained with his descendants in Madrid.

⁸ Cherry et. al. 2004, *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, cat. no. 19.

⁹ Cherry et. al. 2004, *Luis Meléndez. Bodegones*, cat. nos. 4, 5 & 6.

¹⁰ Discussed and reproduced in Cherry et. al., *Luis Meléndez. Still Lifes*, Dublin 2004, pp. 24-25, fig. 8.

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Fig.1. Luis Egidio Meléndez, *Self Portrait*, 1746.
Musée du Louvre, Paris.

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Fig. 2. Luis Egidio Meléndez, *Still life with limes, a box of jelly, a butterfly and vessels*. Museo del Prado, Madrid.



Fig. 3. Luis Egidio Meléndez, *Still life with oranges and walnuts*, 1772. National Gallery, London.

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