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Juan de Zurbarán
Basket of Plums and Slice of Melon,
1640-1650

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JUAN DE ZURBARÁN
(Llerena 1620 – 1649 Sevilla)

BASKET OF PLUMS AND SLICE OF MELON, 1640-1650

Oil on canvas.
25.5 x 28.8 cm; 10 x 11 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

A. Marí, F. Q. Corella, J. Y. Gaso et al. *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, exh. cat., Barcelona 2015, pp. 68-71 and pp. 129-130, reproduced.

Exhibited

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

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We are thankful to Dr. Ángel Aterido for having confirmed the attribution of the present painting to Juan de Zurbarán.

This intimate still life centres on a wicker basket, heaped with purple European plums whose taut skins catch and reflect the light. One plum has rolled from the basket and sits isolated to the left, casting a soft shadow. Resting atop the mound of fruit is a slice of melon of the so-called “Santa Claus” or *pell de gripau* (“toad’s skin”) variety, then cultivated on the Iberian Peninsula. Oblong in form, with a thick, green-striped rind and pale, whitish flesh, it contrasts markedly with the round Cantaloupe melon with pumpkin-coloured flesh familiar from Italian and French still lifes. Particularly striking is the delicate rendering of the pips against the whitish flesh, and the half-blurred fly, attracted by the sweetness of the fruit, which alights on its surface.

Although the position of the melon slice, precariously resting on the plums, is somewhat unusual, it represents an innovation of considerable imaginative and visual power. The melon was a recurrent motif in the still-life tradition from its earliest stages - one thinks of Sánchez Cotán, Van der Hamen and Loarte - yet no clear precedent or parallel for this specific arrangement can be identified within the pictorial tradition of the Spanish Golden Age. Some analogies may nonetheless be drawn with other compositions in which a melon slice is placed upon another element, usually the remainder of the fruit itself: for example Miguel de Pret’s *Still Life with Basket of Figs, Basket of Plums, Melon and Hanging Fruit* (Abelló Collection, dated between 1630 and 1640), a still life by Peter Binoit (d. 1632), sold at Christie’s on 5 July 2007 (lot 51), and an anonymous still life formerly attributed to Louise Moillon, now in a private collection and dated between 1630 and 1640.¹ The motif of the fly on the melon is also a familiar device in still-life painting, as in the aforementioned work by Miguel de Pret and Giovanna Garzoni’s *Still Life with Melon* (Palazzo Pitti, Florence, dated between 1642 and 1650, fig. 1).

The prominence given to the wicker basket in such a small canvas suggests that the painting may originally have formed part of a larger composition, perhaps a religious scene, from which this fragment was cut. In its present state the work is characterised by an austere, tightly controlled arrangement. The stringent realism, earthy palette and forms modelled by a sharp contrast of light against a dark background recall the manner of Francisco de Zurbarán. One might compare, for instance, his *Basket of Apples and Peaches* (45 x 54 cm), circa 1630, whose present whereabouts are unknown (fig. 2).²

¹ D. Alsina, *Louyse Moillon: Paris, vers 1610–1696: la nature morte au Grand Siècle: catalogue raisonné* (Dijon: Faton, 2009), 228.

² O. Delenda, *Francisco de Zurbarán, 1598–1664: catálogo razonado y crítico*, vol. 1 (Madrid: Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico, 2009), 152–53.

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The motif of a single piece of fruit fallen from the basket is common in early Spanish still lifes, notably those of Van der Hamen and the Master of Stirling Maxwell, which Zurbarán could have studied in court collections or during his visit to Madrid in 1634. A Zurbaranesque spirit is also evident in two still lifes with baskets of fruit against a dark ground, in private collections and published by Torres Martín, initially attributed to Francisco de Zurbarán and later to an anonymous follower (with the possibility that the latter may have been Pedro de Campobón).³ A further, closely related still life in the Raleigh Museum, North Carolina (fig. 3), was attributed by Pemán to the “Zurbarán school” and by Torres Martín to an anonymous seventeenth-century Sevillian painter.⁴

On the basis of these considerations, the painting clearly belongs to the Sevillian still-life tradition of around 1640-1650 and reveals a profound dependence on the language of Francisco de Zurbarán.

³ R. Torres Martín, *Zurbarán: el pintor gótico del siglo XVII* (Sevilla: Gráficas del Sur, 1963), cat. no. 109.

R. Torres Martín, *La naturaleza muerta en la pintura española* (Barcelona: Seix y Barral, 1971), 62, pl. 34 and fig. 29.

⁴ C. Pemán, “Juan de Zurbarán,” *Archivo Español de Arte* 31, no. 123 (1958): 193–211, esp. 207 and pl. VI.

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Fig. 1. Giovanna Garzoni, *Plate with Melon and a Slice of Watermelon*, c. 1655–1662, tempera (?) on parchment, 23 × 37.5 cm. Florence, Galleria Palatina, Palazzo Pitti



Fig. 2. Juan de Zurbarán, *Basket of Apples and Peaches*, c. 1630, oil on canvas, 45 × 54 cm. Private collection.

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Fig. 3. Circle of Francisco de Zurbarán, *Still Life with Glass, Fruit, and Jar*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 39.4 × 62.2 cm. Raleigh, North Carolina Museum of Art

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