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Josefa de Óbidos
(Seville 1630 - 1684 Óbidos)

*Still life of flowers, a butterfly
and a basket of fava beans*

oil on panel

63 x 100 cm.;

24 3/4 x 39 3/8 in.

Provenance

Private collection, Lugano, Switzerland.

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In front of us is a deeply fascinating painting, which is fragrant, contemplative and naturalistic at the same time. On a stone floor, wild roses of various colours are arranged next to a basket of fava beans and other flowers; two yellow daisies have fallen from the basket and a small rose on the far left is beginning to lose its petals. A snail slowly moves forward on the floor and butterflies flit through the air, thus giving a vivacious dynamism to the scene. The blossoms fallen and the petals scattered around allude to the ephemeral dimension of things (the passing of time, the caducity of earthly things); the snail is a traditional symbol of resurrection and also of the inviolability of Mary (the ancient belief was that breeding happened without mating). These elements are so evident that the author is likely to have chosen their disposition not by chance: they carry symbolic and religious meaning in accordance with the thoughts and metaphors of 17th century European societies (both the Calvinist North and in the Catholic Mediterranean).

In the 17th century, especially in the first half of the century but sometimes also later on, it was normal for still lifes to be the bearers of symbolic meanings: the phenomenon was widespread in northern Europe, but we can find examples of paintings whose visual and descriptive components unite with moral and religious meanings in Italy and Iberia. The most extraordinary case is that of the nun painter Orsola Maddalena Caccia (1596-1676), whose still lifes are actual 'painted prayers', a real *unicum* in European art.

Here, the flowers and the basket are arranged along an imaginary horizontal line which runs parallel to the eye of the observer, and by paratactic arrangement without a geometric centre: the artist does not employ a symmetric scheme that forces a left to right reading. The clearly analytical light defines the shape and consistency of both the rustic basket and the snail, thus giving an almost illusionistic feel to the softness of the petals of the flowers while also projecting strong shadows on the stone floor. The evident use of archaic compositional formulas (for instance, the space between various compositional elements and the division of the scene into two separate parts) and of a naturalistic light, together with the infused sense of mystic contemplation, denote the influence of Caravaggesque and early 17th century Spanish still lifes: especially, I believe, those of Juan de Zurbaràn (1620-1649).

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The high quality and the formal choices are undoubtedly the work of the great Portuguese painter born in Seville, Josefa de Ayala y Cabrera, also known as Josefa de Obidos (1630-1684), from the small town of Óbidos where she worked for most of her career. The right side of the painting (the basket of fava beans, flowers, and snail) can indeed be found in variant versions such as the big canvas of the Museu Municipal de Santarém, Casa-Museu Anselmo Braancamp Freire: *Still life with sweets, flowers, cheese and a basket of fava beans* (85 x 161 cm.), signed and dated 1676 (fig. 1).

In our painting, the basket of fava beans and the flowers are almost identical, as are the protruding branch of red bluebells, while the left side differs and only shows small wild roses of various types: the scene thus looks more compact and vivid, of unique visual strength and greater contemplative impact which is far less inclined to mere description. I believe this work is one of the best ever realised by the artist. We could probably date it slightly earlier than the Santarém picture exactly because of these archaic and somehow Caravaggesque features. A similar basket also features in the small painting in the Novo Banco collection in Lisbon (which contains mushrooms and strawberry trees), part of a series of paintings executed with Josefa's father Baltasar Gomes Figueira: a notable painter of still lifes and landscapes who descended from a wealthy family of merchants, priests and soldiers, he himself having been a soldier during his youth.¹ Baltasar's style is very close to that of Josefa (hence making a distinction between their hands is hard) but, in my view, is slightly more schematic and is characterised by a rawer chiaroscuro.²

The history of Josefa is of particular interest, and even more so in recent scholarship, following the increase in international attention on the theme of women artists. This is also due to her undoubted artistic qualities and her managerial skills attested to by the independence she was able to achieve for herself which was absolutely uncommon for a woman of the 17th century: she was even able to accumulate quite a substantial wealth. Besides being a pupil and collaborator of Baltasar, Josefa clearly also knew the works of her maternal uncle, Bernabé Ayala, a fellow painter of Francisco de Zurbarán, whose Caravaggesque naturalism had a significant influence on Josefa. Art historians have highlighted her interest in the still lifes of Juan Sánchez Cotán (though I would like to reduce

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the emphasis on the alleged relations between the two), but more evident is her familiarity with the school of Seville, specifically the still lifes of Juan de Zurbarán.³

Josefa arrived in Portugal, her father's native country, when she was a child (1634) and settled in Óbidos. After studying in the convent of St. Anne in Coimbra, she came back to Óbidos in 1653. Here she lived as a free and independent woman and realised sacred paintings, altarpieces for convents and monasteries, as well as portraits and still lifes for private collections. She was a skilled businesswoman and became the owner of houses and farms: a document dated 1663 refers to her as '*donzela emancipada*'.⁴ Josefa, who initially used her maternal grandfather's surname (Ayala) and that of her mother (Cabrera), later signed her works '*de Óbidos*'. She was a cultured woman, fully aware of her status: in one self-portrait she depicted herself as the Allegory of Knowledge and proudly positioned herself next to Fame (1653).⁵ Given that she was a young woman of the 17th century who grew up in a Catholic environment during a period of profound moral repression, the position that she created for herself was evidently not negligible.

Alberto Cottino

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Figure 1. Josefa de Óbidos, *Still life of sweets, flowers, cheese and a basket of fava beans*, 1676. Museu Municipal de Santarém, Casa-Museu Anselmo Braancamp Freire

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Footnotes

¹ 'Baltasar joined a Portuguese military contingent who set out to aid in the defense of Cádiz during the Anglo-Spanish War. A few years later, probably still as a military man, he settled in Seville and became acquainted with Ensign Juan de Ortiz de Ayala, a painting aficionado whose daughter, Catherine Camacho de Cabrera y Romero, he married at the end of 1629'. J. Oliveira Caetano, *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child: A New Masterpiece by Josefa de Ayala*, exh. cat., Montevideo 2019, p. 19.

² The paintings from the Novo Banco series can be found in *Josefa de Óbidos e a Invenção do Barroco Português*, exh. cat., Lisbon 2015, p. 148, n. 68-70. The same basket can also be found in another canvas by both father and daughter in a private collection (*ibid.*, p. 154, fig. 80), and in another beautiful painting by Josefa alone, also in a private collection (*ibid.*, p. 155, fig. 82).

³ Regarding the *bodegon* in the Chicago Institute of Art, a masterpiece by Juan de Zurbarán, P. Cherry stated: 'This work shares together with the Zurbanesque *bodegones* of Josefa de Ayala a peculiar trait of delicacy and refinement'. P. Cherry, *Arte y Naturaleza. El Bodegón Español e nel Siglo de Oro*, Aranjuez 1999, p. 269, n. 49.

⁴ See J. Andrews, 'Josefa de Ayala e Cabreira's St. Catherine of Alexandria altarpiece and Female Empowerment', in *Representing Women's Political Identity in the Early Modern Iberian World*, curated by J. Roe & J. Andrew, Milton Park 2020, chapter 5. Also J. Oliveira Caetano, 'Josefa de Ayala (1630-1684): Pintora e "donzela emancipada"', in *Josefa...*, *cit.*, p. 62, where other bibliographic notes can be found. Oliveira Caetano recalls: 'One of the immediate consequences of such activity was achieving autonomy: artistic autonomy from her father's workshop, but also civil and economic independence as a legally free person. Women in the seventeenth century were denied the possibility of having sufficient legal personality to sign notarial or commercial contracts, requiring the authorization of a guardian, the father or a brother. Widows were excepted, as they were entitled to manage their family assets. But other than widowhood, such a status could be achieved through "emancipation", by which fathers could authorize legal independence, in practice similar to that of a widow'. J. Oliveira Caetano, *Reading the Fate of the Christ Child: A New Masterpiece by Josefa de Ayala*, exh. cat., Montevideo 2019, p. 26.

⁵ On the incision, which celebrates her studies at the Augustine convent of St. Anne in Coimbra, and on her symbolic meanings, see L. De Girolami Cheney, 'The Emblematic Self-Portraits of Josefa de Ayala D'Óbidos', in *Mediterranean Studies*, vol. 9, 2000, pp. 203-229.