

BARTOLOMÉ PÉREZ DE LA DEHESA
(Madrid (?) ca. 1634 – 1698 Madrid)

Pair of mirror frames painted with floral motifs

Oil on wood

111 x 89 cm

43 11/16 x 35 1/16 in.

One frame signed lower right margin: "Bme Perez"

Labelled on the back: "A. PLASENCIA. N° 52." "A. PLASENCIA. N° 53."

Provenance:

Bilbao, Antonio Plasencia Bohígas collection; Subastas Bilbao, 11 January 2023, lot 6.

Literature:

Aterido, A., *El final del Siglo de Oro La pintura en Madrid en el cambio dinástico (1685-1726)*, Madrid, 2015.

Cavestany, J., marqués de Moret, *Floreros y bodegones en la pintura española*, Madrid, 1936-1940.

Cherry, P., *Arte y naturaleza. El bodegón español en el Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, 1999.

Pérez Sánchez, A.E., *Pintura española de bodegones y floreros de 1600 a Goya*, Madrid, 1983.

Pérez Sánchez, A.E., (ed.), *Juan de Arellano*, Madrid, 1998.

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Flower painting reached its peak of achievement in the second half of the 17th century. Its evolution in Europe during the High Baroque period was so considerable that it came to be seen as a sub-genre relatively independent of the still life. Works of this kind reached a particular peak of brilliance at the Madrid court of the last Spanish Habsburgs. During this period the growth of art collecting in the capital of the Spanish monarchy, which resulted in the arrival of numerous flower paintings from Italy and Flanders, the demand for the interior decoration of royal palaces (starting with the Alcázar) and the mansions of the highest ranks of the nobility, and the emergence of studios which specialised in these genres and could thus satisfy demand from within the capital itself, culminated in a high point of flower painting in Madrid.

Among the artists who specialised in this genre it was Bartolomé Pérez who achieved the greatest official recognition, becoming one of the painters to Charles II in 1689. Pérez initially trained with the now little known Andrés de la Torre, entering his studio as an apprentice in 1655. Nonetheless, his preference for flower painting derives from his contact with the most renowned specialist working in Madrid in the 17th century: Juan de Arellano (Santorcaz, 1614-Madrid, 1676), who dominated this genre for more than thirty years. Pérez's first master worked near Arellano's studio on the calle Mayor and surviving documents indicate that he was friendly with him. This probably explains why the young Pérez knew the Arellano family, although his first known contact dates from 1663 with his marriage to the celebrated artist's daughter, Juana de Arellano. At that point he began to work in his father-in-law's studio, faithfully assimilating his themes and models. So much was this the case that the writer on art Antonio Palomino stated that the young painter "succeeded in painting flowers as well" as Arellano, with whom he also worked directly, painting the figures in some garlands executed by the master.

This status of outstanding follower eventually made Pérez the principal creator of floral compositions in Madrid following the death of Arellano, from whom he took up the baton and undoubtedly the running of his active workshop in which Arellano's sons Julián, Manuel and José also worked, together with other collaborators. While Pérez de la Dehesa also produced religious compositions, it was his works in decorative genres that singled him out from his contemporaries, both for his skill and his diversification of formats and techniques in the context of a period when demand for such works was increasing. In addition to floral compositions and garlands, he also produced theatrical scenery and curtains, as well as mural paintings. His creations of this type for theatrical productions at the royal palaces, his ephemeral decorations for the entry of Marie-Louise of Orleans, and above all "the flower paintings and other painted decorations" on the walls of the queen's chamber in the Alcázar in Madrid earned the artist the honorary title of Painter to the King in 1689.

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While Pérez attempted to secure more significant projects, presenting designs for Queen Marie-Louise's funerary monument, his work at court remained focused on decorations of various types. Together with other artists he painted the epitaphs and hieroglyphics for that monument and, most importantly, collaborated on one of the most surprising commissions created for Charles II, the so-called "Golden Bedchamber" (1690-92). This was a wooden structure completely covered in gilded panels painted with flowers and garlands by Pérez de la Dehesa and José de Cieza. It is also recorded that he painted a case for a gem-set clock for Mariana of Neuburg, Charles II's second wife. The artist's premature death in 1698 due to an accident while painting the walls of the staircase in the palace of Monteleón in Madrid brought a sudden and tragic end to a career that had been unprecedentedly successful for an artist working in a genre considered of lesser status.

These two frames, very possibly intended for mirrors, directly relate to Pérez's work on palace decoration, in which painting was combined with the other decorative arts in a sophisticated symbiosis. As such, they can be considered an important and previously unknown example of a very specific type of activity that was widely practised at the time. Only a few panels from the above-mentioned "Golden Bedchamber" previously offered proof of this level of refinement, now confirmed and documented by these mirror frames. While only their provenance in the 20th century is known, when they belonged to the financier Antonio Plasencia Bohigas, it is clear that they were created in the context of the court in Madrid in the late 17th century, as discussed above. Both the frames' format and the combination of hardwoods and the colourful range of flowers and plants that covers their four sides reflect the aesthetic that emerged in Spanish cabinetmaking workshops in the second half of the 17th century.

The frames' rectangular form is broken by their outset corners. Both have the same tripartite design: a black frieze between reddish mouldings on the inner and outer sides. On the frieze Pérez de la Dehesa painted the flowers grouped in symmetrical arrangements by concentrating some of them at the corners and connecting them with the other varieties that run along the four sides in the manner of garlands. Although they occupy the entire surface of the frieze, they are more concentrated in the centre of each side and are more evident in the upper and lower sections. The chromatic combination of the flowers contrasting with the dark background creates an animated organic effect in which the curving plants vigorously counterbalance the pronounced straightness of the mouldings and corners. The repertoire of flowers recalls Juan de Arellano's, with a predominance of red and white roses alongside variegated tulips and anemones. The pinks and mock orange blossom also stand out, dotted among the more abundant species; like snowballs, their round white forms stand out in the lower right corner of one of the frames. The delicate pictorial technique employed here, which is precise but also spontaneous, is closely comparable to that of Bartolomé Pérez, by whom we have surviving floral compositions from 1665 onwards. The artist adapted the approach evident in those works in an ingenious manner, with the dark background against which the flowers stand out here compressed into a narrow strip, thus emphasising the subtle rhythm of the different types of flowers. Rather than being based on live specimens, these follow the models which Pérez assimilated from works by Arellano and, with regard to the Italian flower painters, from Mario Nuzzi. Paradoxically, the flowers that form

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the subject of Pérez's paintings have here extended over the edges of the canvas in order to twine themselves around the frame that normally embellishes them. They thus replace cut flowers with a more vivid and colourful type of representation and one highly characteristic of taste at the court of Charles II.

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