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A detailed still life painting by the Master of the Vanitas Texts. The scene is set on a dark, draped table. In the center, a stack of books is prominent. The top book has the Latin phrase "VERVM ET FALSVM" (True and False) inscribed on its spine. Below it, another book is visible with a torn piece of paper that reads "HEC SOLA VIRTVS" (This is the only virtue). To the right, a globe on a dark stand is partially visible, showing a zodiac sign. In the foreground, a lit candle in a holder, a pair of dice, and a deck of cards are scattered. To the left, a vase holds several large, vibrant red flowers. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures of the books, the globe, and the flowers against a dark background.

Master of the Vanitas Texts

*Vanitas Still Life with a Zodiac Globe, a Lit Candle, Dice, Books,
Cards and Flowers, all on a Draped Table, c. 1650*

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MASTER OF THE VANITAS TEXTS

(Active mid 17th Century in Madrid)

VANITAS STILL LIFE with a Zodiac Globe, a Lit Candle, Dice, Books, Cards and Flowers, all on a Draped Table, c. 1650

Oil on canvas stuck on wood
50 x 63 cm; 19 3/4 x 24 3/4 in.

Inscribed on a book *VERUM ET FALSUM* ("True and false") and on a sheet of paper *HEC SOLA VIRTU(S)* ("This alone is virtue ")

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. 84-87 and pp. 132-133, reproduced.

Exhibition History

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

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At the centre rises a zodiacal globe set within an armillary frame, its pale surface catching light that falls from the left. To its left, a dark glass vase holds fresh flowers, while, below, a stack of volumes is bound with cords and mottled by age. At the right edge, a small open book and a brass candlestick with a short, wavering flame complete the ensemble. Dice lie near the globe's base and a deck of Spanish playing cards peeps from the lower left, all resting on a richly patterned cloth.

The painter's close attention to surface, from the parchment-like pages and worn leather to the fragile petals, turns the objects into silent emblems of time's passage. Within seventeenth-century Hispanic painting, *Vanitas* compositions enjoyed marked success among courtly and ecclesiastical patrons.¹ The present work deploys a repertory of motifs grounded in Counter-Reformation culture, where meditation on the brevity of life (*memento mori*) and the deception of worldly goods was understood as a spur to spiritual reform.² Here, the books assume a privileged role. The inscription on one volume, VERUM ET FALSUM ("True and false"), frames the act of reading as moral discernment, while the paper slip set among the folio pages, HEC SOLA VIRTUS ("This alone is virtue"), offers a direct exhortation to virtue as the sole enduring good. Yet the very worn materiality of the library tempers its positive connotation, reminding the beholder that human works, even intellectual ones, succumb to time unless aligned with divine truth.

The zodiac globe and its armillary support signal the learned measurement of the cosmos and, by extension, the ambition to comprehend the order of creation. The dice and playing cards denote "worldly deceits" and they counter the disciplined study represented by the books. The candle, already reduced to a short stump, introduces a temporal accent: its flickering flame evokes life's fragile duration, while the surrounding darkness suggests the imminence of extinction. The flowers, poised between bloom and decline, provide the most immediate natural analogue to that theme. Notably, the skull is absent; instead, the painter relies on the contrast between devotional learning and idle diversion, and on the visible ageing of matter itself, to visualise mortality.

The painting is convincingly attributable to the anonymous Madrid-based hand conventionally known as the Master of the *Vanitas* Texts, active in the mid-seventeenth century.³ Over the last decades an identifiable corpus has coalesced around this personality, comprising small-format *Vanitas* still lifes unified by a distinctive iconographic and stylistic language, including the recurrent insertion of Latin moralising inscriptions, frequently written on separate slips of paper or on book

¹ See W. B. Jordan and P. Cherry, *Spanish Still Life from Velázquez to Goya*, London 1995, pp. 21-23.

² See W. B. Jordan, *Spanish Still Life in the Golden Age, 1600-1650*, Fort Worth: Kimbell Art Museum / Toledo Museum of Art, 1985, p. 20.

³ We are thankful to Dr. Ángel Aterido for having confirmed this attribution.

COLNAGHI

spines. Several works now associated with this master were formerly attributed to Francisco Palacios, a view no longer generally accepted.⁴ The paintings from the Hohenlohe Collection sold in London in 1979, together with the remainder of the estate from Quexigal, have been central to disentangling the two hands. As already observed in the literature, neither those canvases nor the present work bear meaningful stylistic affinity to Palacios's two signed still lifes published by Xavier de Salas and dated 1648.⁵

Among the master's recorded works, a *Vanitas* sold at Sotheby's New York in 2005 offers the closest parallel to the present composition (fig.1). It shares not only the small scale, the arrangement of learned and gaming motifs, and the painter's cool, even illumination, but also two highly specific traits: the same emphatic drapery covering the table, with analogous fold patterns, and the repetition of the Latin maxim "Hec sola virtus" on a protruding paper sheet. A further, very similar composition appeared at Sotheby's Monaco, 17-18 June 1988, lot 819 (one of a pair), confirming the persistence of a template within the workshop or practice of this still anonymous artist. For other comparable works see the pair of *Vanitas Still Lifes* sold at Christie's, Monaco, 3 April 1987, lot 60 and that sold at Sotheby's, London, 5 July 1995, lot 286.

⁴ For more information about the painter see J. L. B. Moya, "El pintor Francisco de Palacios. Algunas ..." in *Archivo Español de Arte*, 1987, pp. 425-436.

⁵ X. de Salas Bosch, "Sobre dos bodegones de Francisco de Palacios," *Archivo Español de Arte y Arqueología*, XI, no. 33 (1935), pp. 275-278

COLNAGHI



Fig. 1. Master of the Vanitas Texts, *Vanitas Still Life with a Zodiac Globe, a Snuffed Candle, Dice, Books, Cards and Flowers, all on a Draped Table*, oil on canvas, 65 x 66 cm. Anonymous sale, Sotheby's New York, 28 January 2005, lot 290.

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