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Tomás Hiepes
Four Circular Still Lifes, c. 1649

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TOMÁS HIEPES

(Valencia c. 1600 - 1674)

FOUR CIRCULAR STILL LIFES, c. 1649

Oil on canvas stuck on wood
D. 31.5 cm; 12 3/8 in.

One signed '*Thomas Hiepes*' at the bottom, the rest on the back.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

I. Oppermann, *Das spanische Stillleben im 17. Jahrhundert: Vom fensterlosen Raum zur lichtdurchfluteten Landschaft*, Berlin 2007, p. 91, figs. 83-86.

A. Marí, F. Q. Corella, J. Y. Gaso et al. *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, exh. cat., Barcelona 2015, pp. 80-83 and pp. 131-132, 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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Drawn to the atmospheric effects produced by direct light in the open landscape, Hiepes brought his formative and experimental phase as a specialist in still life to a close with these small circular canvases. While evidently intended to decorate, they also afforded him a laboratory for studying natural motifs. The resulting images operate through a subtle dialectic: the landscape acts as a living backdrop, against which fruits, born of the same environment but severed from it, are displayed as objects of contemplation rather than organisms.

Although at this stage it cannot be proved that the four paintings were conceived as a single group, their identical dimensions strongly suggest a shared origin. All four works are constructed according to the same compositional logic: a small number of enlarged motifs are placed close to the viewer, while secondary elements diminish in scale as they recede. Each scene is framed by a cloudy sky and trees that form a kind of aperture through which light enters to strike the foreground objects. In this respect they relate to *Huntsman Drinking* and *Huntsman Slumbering in a Landscape* (Museo de Bellas Artes de Valencia, figs. 1-2): though those figurative paintings reveal the constraints of similarly narrow formats, with the artist evidently struggling to accommodate full figures convincingly within so tight a field.

Hiepes's handling, compact colour zones laid in short, deliberate strokes, reinforces the stylistic coherence of the series and its high pictorial finish. The brushwork has something of a precise calligraphic character, signalling the assurance with which he resolves problems of balance and object placement in restricted space. The circular format, far from limiting him, appears to have prompted a conscious, self-imposed challenge.

Only one of the four compositions introduces a man-made object: an arresting ceramic fruit bowl, a motif familiar from Hiepes's earlier still lifes and at times carrying marked iconographic weight. Its presence confers a discreet air of exoticism, recalling the still-life language of Jacques Linard (c. 1600-1645). Linard's *China Porcelain with Flowers* of 1640 (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, fig. 3) comes closest in spirit to Hiepes's Valencian canvases in this respect.

The Prado preserves two of Hiepes's still lifes - *Still Life with Figs* and *Still Life with Grapes* (figs. 4-5), the latter signed and dated 1649 - which, despite their rectangular format, share key features with the present *tondi*. Comparable too is a still life in a private collection showing pomegranates, aubergines, pears and figs before a landscape. The dated Prado example offers a secure anchor, making it likely that these four circular works were executed in or around 1649.

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The Museo Fundación Lázaro Galdiano owns two small still lifes by Pedro de Medina (c. 1620-1691) that testify to a broader Baroque practice of producing modest-format paintings of this sort. Their original function, however, remains unclear: they may have served as decorative panels - perhaps for a domestic dining room - or as *divertimenti*, born from an interest in geometric experimentation preparatory to more ambitious undertakings.

The appeal of the genre endured. In 1771 Luis Egidio Meléndez (1716-1780) painted his *Still Life with Watermelon and Apples* (Museo del Prado, fig. 6) and related works, demonstrating the continuing success of such compositions. Still later, Gustave Courbet (1819-1877), in his final years, returned to open-air still life to explore the vivid tension between fertile nature and objects already entering decay.

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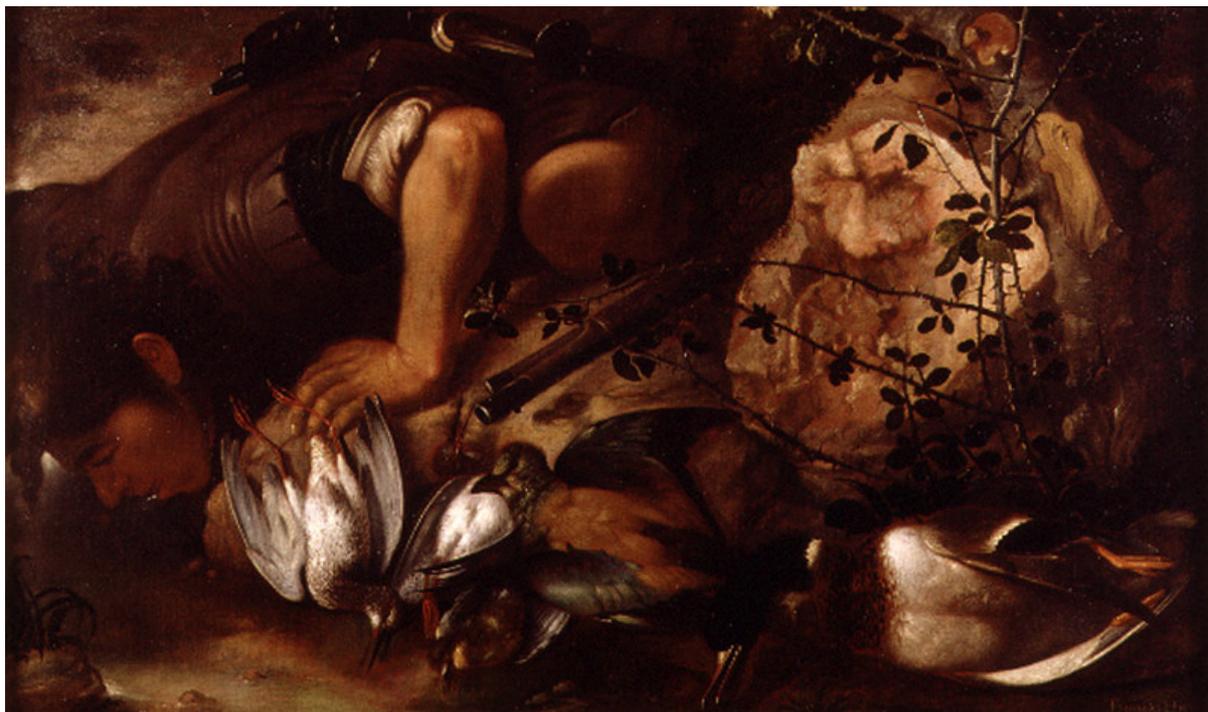


Fig. 1. Tomás Hiepes, *Huntsman Drinking by a Stream*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 68 × 113 cm. Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes.



Fig. 2. Tomás Hiepes, *Huntsman Sleeping*, c. 1650, oil on canvas, 68 × 113 cm. Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes.

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Fig. 3. Jacques Linard, *Chinese Bowl with Flowers*, 1640, oil on canvas, 53.2 × 66 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza

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Fig. 4. Tomás Hiepes, *Still Life with Figs*, 1649, oil on canvas, 29 × 43 cm.
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado



Fig. 5. Tomás Hiepes, *Still Life with Grapes*, 1649, oil on canvas, 29 × 43 cm.
Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

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Fig. 6. Luis Egidio Meléndez, *Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape*, 1771, oil on canvas, 63 × 84 cm. Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado

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