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Juan Van Der Hamen
Still Life with Fruit and Vase, 1626

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JUAN VAN DER HAMEN
(Madrid 1596 – 1631)

STILL LIFE WITH FRUIT AND VASE, 1626

Signed and dated lower right:

"Ju Valderamen fa'/1626".

Oil on canvas.

56 x 99 cm; 22 x 39 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

J. R. Triadó, "Juan van der Hammen bodegonista ", *Estudios pro Arte*, no. 1, 1975, p. 50;

J. R. Triadó, *El bodegón en la pintura española del siglo XVII*, Universitat de Barcelona, 1982, 11, p. 491;

A. Marí, F. Q. Corella, J. Y. Gaso et al. *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, exh. cat., Barcelona 2015, pp. 54-57 and p. 126-127, 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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In this signed *Still Life with Fruit and Vase* (1626), Juan van der Hamen sets an array of fruits and objects upon two staggered stone ledges. The composition is boldly asymmetrical yet balanced. On the upper shelf, a wicker basket brims with large golden pomegranates, its round forms silhouetted against a dark void. The lower level displays a single overripe pomegranate (its rind burst to reveal red seeds), a cluster of plums, a small goldfinch perched inquisitively, a dangling bunch of grapes at upper right, and a lidded jug or vase of dark, reflective metal. This “graded shelf” arrangement - one ledge above another - was an innovative departure from the strict, single-plane still lifes of the previous decade. Van der Hamen carefully orchestrates the objects in space: the basket on the higher left ledge and the vessel on the lower right create a diagonal dialogue, while the scattered fruits and the bird link the two tiers visually. The result is a dynamic yet harmonious still life, where each element is given breathing room in an airy, spacious setting.

A single light source from the left brilliantly illuminates the pale geometry of the stone ledges and the roundness of the fruit, casting crisp shadows to the right. The basket of pomegranates projects a sharp shadow on the front face of the upper shelf, and the lone pomegranate on the lower slab casts a shadow on the surface beneath it. Meanwhile, the background is plunged in deep tenebrist darkness, similarly to the stark voids of Juan Sánchez Cotán’s earlier bodegones. This canvas recalls other still lifes by van der Hamen, in which he has recourse to the graded shelf format, in particular one also dated 1626, the *Still Life with Fruit and Glassware* currently preserved at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (Fig. 1). In both works the basket of pomegranates stands on the top shelf to the left of the observer, while on the shelf below we see the jug and plums.

The array of ripe fruits likely carries multiple connotations. Pomegranates, with their myriad seeds, were traditional symbols of fecundity and resurrection (in Christian art they evoked the Church or eternal life through Christ’s rebirth). Grapes similarly could signify the Eucharist - the grapes’ juice recalling the wine of the Last Supper and the blood of Christ - or more broadly the autumn harvest and the transience of earthly delights. The plums and other stone fruits might allude to the fleeting pleasures of the senses, a common theme in Golden Age still lifes. The presence of the goldfinch is especially telling: this bird was associated with Christ’s Passion (according to legend, the goldfinch acquired its red facial mark by plucking a thorn from Christ’s crown, staining itself with His blood) and often appears in religious paintings as a symbol of sacrifice or salvation. The arrangement also evokes the ancient Greco-Roman anecdote of Zeuxis and Parrhasius, two Greek painters from the fifth century BC, who painted grapes so lifelike that birds flew down to peck at them. Van der

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Hamen had already used this topos in still lifes from 1621 and 1622, in which he based his compositions on those of Frans Snyders (1579-1657).

Each object is distinct in surface quality, almost inviting the viewer to feel the cool ceramic or metal and taste the ripe fruit with their eyes. Van der Hamen was especially lauded for his ability to recreate reality; indeed, his learned friends in Madrid - including Lope de Vega and Luis de Góngora - singled him out for praise, marveling at how his painted objects could rival nature. This blend of scientific observation and aesthetic arrangement is a hallmark of van der Hamen's style. His works were sophisticated enough to be praised by poets and housed in palaces, yet they remained true to the everyday imagery of fruit, fauna, and household items. In this way, the present canvas embodies the Spanish Baroque still life's dual nature: austere yet sumptuous, realistic yet allegorical, drawing from international influences yet forging a distinctly Spanish vision: the culmination of the realist tendencies of Northern Europe combined with the fruit of Renaissance humanism.

By 1626, van der Hamen was about 30 years old and at the height of his creative powers. His personal style had crystallised, and he was experimenting with novel compositions (the graded shelf format) that would set a trend. It is around this time that he also began painting more flamboyant works featuring luxurious objects (fine glassware, imported porcelains, elaborate confectionery), catering to the cosmopolitan taste of patrons in Madrid. Stylistically, the painting sits at the crossroads of van der Hamen's influences. Early in his career (*circa* 1615-1620), his still lifes were more symmetrical, frontal, and austere, reflecting the influence of Juan Sánchez Cotán and other Spanish pioneers, as well as the precision of Flemish miniaturists and the dramatic intensity of Caravaggio (see for example Fig. 2). By the mid-1620s, however, van der Hamen had fully embraced asymmetry and depth, pioneering new still-life formats. *Still Life with Fruit and Vase* is one of the very first of these experiments; in fact 1626 marks the introduction of his "graded shelves" formula, which was to become his signature contribution to Spanish still-life painting.

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Fig. 1. Juan van der Hamen, *Still Life with Fruit and Glassware*, 1626, oil on canvas.
Houston The Museum of Fine Arts.

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Fig. 2. Juan van der Hamen, *Still-Life with a Basket and Sweetmeats*, 1622, oil on canvas. Madrid, Museo del Prado.

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Fig. 3. Juan van der Hamen, *Still Life with Game, Fruit, and Chestnuts*, 1619, oil on canvas, with inventory numbers "241" and "149" in the lower corners.

Sold at Ansorena, Madrid, 3 October 2023, lot 97.

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