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Juan de Arellano
Basket of Flowers, ca. 1670

JUAN DE ARELLANO
(Santorcaz 1614 – 1676 Madrid)

BASKET OF FLOWERS, ca. 1670

Signed lower right: '*Juan de Arellano*'

Oil on canvas, applied to panel
57 x 71 cm
22 ½ x 28 in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

Marí, A., Quílez Corella, F., Yeguas Gassó, J. et al., *Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro*, exh. cat., Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, 2015, pp. 96, 134–135, reproduced.

Exhibitions

Incólume. Bodegones del Siglo de Oro, Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, 9 October 2015 – 28 February 2016;
On long-term loan to the Museu Nacional d'Art de Catalunya, Barcelona, until 2024.



Occupying almost the entire surface of the canvas, a sumptuous bouquet rises from a shallow wicker basket set on a stone pedestal and silhouetted against a dark, neutral ground. The flowers, painted with meticulous attention to species and varietal character, include red and white striped tulips, carnations in various stages of bloom, dense white inflorescences, blue campanulas or delphiniums and several sprays of white blossoms identifiable as Madonna lilies.

Juan de Arellano's sophisticated control of light is central to the composition. A raking illumination from the upper left catches the most salient blossoms, in particular the striped tulips, the central ball of white flowers and the scarlet carnations, while the stems, foliage and background recede into a rich penumbra. This play of light creates a powerful chiaroscuro that lends the entire arrangement a sculptural, almost monumental character. The subtle sheen on the wicker and the carefully described stone ledge further anchor the bouquet in space, emphasising the contrast between the enduring solidity of these inanimate supports and the fragility of the blossoms they sustain.

Although at first sight the painting appears an unequivocal celebration of nature's brilliance, it is equally informed by the moralising undercurrent characteristic of Baroque still life. Within the Spanish tradition of *bodegón* and vanitas imagery, flowers, like fruit, function as emblems of the transience of worldly beauty and the inevitability of decay. Arellano's meditation on this theme is discreet rather than didactic. No petals have yet fallen, and there are no overt signs of corruption; yet, on closer inspection, certain blooms on the right side begin to droop, while some leaves turn and curl, their surfaces dulled and their edges slightly desiccated. These almost imperceptible indications of deterioration complicate the seductive surface, prompting the beholder to reflect on the illusory nature of purely sensual enjoyment and the futility of a life devoted to pleasure and vanity.

One of the most significant aspects of Arellano's achievement, exemplified here, is his elevation of the floral element from a subsidiary motif within larger religious or allegorical narratives to an autonomous pictorial category with its own internal logic and expressive possibilities. Whereas artists such as Francisco de Zurbarán had already exploited flowers as occasions for displaying technical bravura within devotional compositions, Arellano isolates the bouquet, freeing it from narrative context and allowing its formal beauty and symbolic resonance to constitute the subject in their own right. The present work thus participates in, and helps to consolidate, the emergence of independent flower painting in Madrid during the later seventeenth century.

In terms of quality, complexity of arrangement and refinement of execution, this basket can be aligned with Arellano's finest works from the final decade of his career,

around 1670. The painting is closely comparable to the pair of baskets of flowers now in the Museo Nacional del Prado (figs. 1–2), as well as to related compositions preserved in the Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, the Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao and the Fundación Banco Santander (figs. 3–5). In these works, as in the present painting, the artist manages to combine a convincing naturalism with an idealising sense of order that betrays careful studio construction rather than direct transcription from a single bouquet.

Paintings of this calibre and elaboration reflect the high esteem in which Arellano's flower pieces were held by the sophisticated aristocratic clientele of late Habsburg Madrid.



Fig. 1: Juan de Arellano, *Basket of Flowers*, ca. 1670, oil on canvas, 84.9 x 105.1 cm (33 ⅜ x 41 ⅜ in.), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P003139



Fig. 2: Juan de Arellano, *Basket of Flowers*, 1668–1670, oil on canvas, 84 x 105 cm (33 ⅛ x 41 ⅜ in.), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P003138



Fig. 3: Juan de Arellano, *Basket of Flowers*, oil on canvas, 57 x 67 cm (22 ½ x 26 ⅜ in.), Real Academia de Bellas Artes de San Fernando, Madrid



Fig. 4: Juan de Arellano, *Small Basket of Flowers*, 1671, oil on canvas, 84 x 105.5 cm (33 ⅛ x 41 ½ in.), Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao, Bilbao, inv. no. DEP618



Fig. 5: Juan de Arellano, *Still Life with Flowers*, ca. 1650–1660, oil on canvas, 122 x 101 cm (48 x 39 ¾ in.), Fundación Banco Santander, Madrid

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