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Juan de Espinosa
Still Life with Apples, Walnut, Grapes and Acorns,
ca. 1646

JUAN DE ESPINOSA
(active in Madrid, documented 1628 – 1659)

STILL LIFE WITH APPLES, WALNUT, GRAPES AND ACORNS, ca. 1646

Oil on canvas
60 x 43.5 cm
23 ⅝ x 17 ⅛ in.

Provenance

Private collection.

Literature

Jordan, W. B. and Schroth, S., *Spanish Still Life in the Golden Age, 1600–1650*, exh. cat., Fort Worth, Kimbell Art Museum, 1985, p. 170, fig. VIII.2.
Jordan, W. B., *La imitación de la naturaleza: los bodegones de Sánchez Cotán*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 1992, p. 72, illustrated p. 73, fig. 1.
Cherry, P., *Arte y naturaleza: el bodegón español en el Siglo de Oro*, Madrid, Fundación de Apoyo a la Historia del Arte Hispánico, 1999, p. 210, fig. 140.
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. 72–75, 130, illustrated.

Exhibitions

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



Juan de Espinosa had a pivotal role in the development of Spanish still life painting from the second third of the seventeenth century, and the present canvas is exemplary of his achievements, both in its medium-sized format and in the carefully calibrated structure of its composition.

Within this framework, Espinosa acknowledges his debt to earlier masters who, like himself, cultivated a genre particularly esteemed at the Madrid court. The present still life reveals above all the influence of Juan van der Hamen (1596–1631), whose major works Espinosa would undoubtedly have known. He borrowed certain figurative motifs in a process of informed assimilation which, however, never lapses into mere imitation. On the contrary, while his work recalls established precedents, Espinosa consistently reasserted his own artistic identity through distinctive compositional formulae and, above all, through a rigorous technique that yielded remarkably subtle effects.

Working with a restrained chromatic range, Espinosa succeeds in elevating the ostensible simplicity of his subject matter, transforming quotidian objects into near-geometrical forms of a more poetic nature. The short, deft brushstrokes that animate the apples in the foreground showcase his mastery in the use of light, intensifying the tenebrist backdrop - dark, recessive, and deliberately impenetrable - a device that aligns him with the painters active at the Madrid court between the 1620s and 1640s. His use of objects suspended on strings - grapes and acorns poised in a transitional space - further recalls the solutions developed earlier by Van der Hamen and, before him, by Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627). In this regard, it is instructive to recall a comparable still life in the Museo Nacional del Prado (fig. 1), in which Espinosa employs *trompe-l'œil* effects with remarkable deliberation, the objects arranged on staggered shelves, in accordance with earlier models by Van der Hamen. Given that the Prado painting is signed and dated 1646, it is reasonable to propose that the present canvas was executed around the same time.

Espinosa's still lifes distinguish themselves by their high aesthetic ambition and the artist's refined technical vocabulary. His rendering of grape clusters became a hallmark of a figurative culture contemporaneous with that of Juan Fernández, known as "el Labrador" (active in Madrid during the first half of the seventeenth century), who likewise employed grapes as a recurrent motif. Both painters, drawing upon literary traditions such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, in which the technical virtuosity of ancient Greek painters is celebrated, sought to blur the boundary between natural truth and painted likeness. Their works participate in the longstanding ambition to deceive the eye, thereby affirming the intellectual status of painting in accordance with the humanist notion - derived from Horace's *ut pictura poesis* - that equates the visual and poetic arts.



Fig. 1: Juan de Espinosa, *Octagonal Still Life with Bunches of Grapes*, 1646, oil on canvas, 67 x 68 cm (26 ⅜ x 26 ¾ in.), Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid, inv. no. P007924

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