

Luis Meléndez and the Art of Still Life

by Gail Leggio

The kitchen still life is a modest subcategory of a modest genre, void of elevating themes: the dying rose and skull of the moralizing vanitas, the luxury gold and silver witnesses to the success of Renaissance princes and seventeenth-century Dutch merchants. The best-known master of the kitchen still life is the Frenchman Jean Baptiste Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), a realist who preferred the comforts of bourgeois life to the decadent fantasies of the aristocracy. His well-constructed arrangements enveloped in atmospheric light were admired by the Impressionists and Cubists, placing him firmly in the art history mainstream. Chardin's contemporary Luis Meléndez (1715–80) is not nearly as well known, but his work—on view in “Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life,” which opened this summer at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.—is a revelation. Meléndez's paintings are boldly designed, and his verisimilitude is uncanny. The thirty-one paintings in the exhibition, all compact in scale, pack a punch.

Consider *Still Life with Beef, Bowl of Ham and Vegetables, and Receptacles* (c. 1772), which depicts the ingredients for a stew—meat, onions, herbs and spices, bread—along with the required utensils. The quality of the foodstuffs, especially the handsome butcher's product, suggests a prosperous if unpretentious household. The equipment tells us something about an eighteenth-century Spanish kitchen: a packet of spices sits next to a mortar and pestle; there is a handsome copper pot, a semi-glazed olive oil jar, a knife, an Alcorón ceramic *lebrillo* bowl. (The exhibition includes a few examples of similar objects for comparison.) There is nothing accidental or anecdotal about the arrangement. Meléndez is not simply documenting a scene from everyday life. The painting is a fictional construct, based on the study of very real individual things but fully assembled only on the canvas. The artist painted each object separately, working first on those in the foreground and adding components piecemeal, moving toward the back.

Each element is intensely present: the raw red beef, the brick-tone cured ham, the fresh green herbs, the round crusty loaf, half-split into sculptural lobes, that extends out over the edge of the rough wooden table into the viewer's space. Textures are captured, with hypnagogic clarity, by strong artificial light from the left, Meléndez's usual preference. Against the featureless dark brown backdrop, the illusion of three-dimensionality is emphasized by the proliferation of rounded forms: the spotlighted foreground loaf, the matte, semi-glazed ceramic vessels, the shiny copper pot, the brass mortar with its softer sheen, the curved chops on the bone and curled chorizo link. Jaunty diagonals—a wooden spoon, the brass pestle, pot lids at a rakish angle—provide vivacious counterpoint. Formally, this is an exciting painting.

*Still Life with Figs and
Bread, c. 1770*

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D.C.



Layers of historical background are elucidated by exhibition organizers Gretchen A. Hirschauer and Catherine A. Metzger, along with catalogue contributors Peter Cherry and Natacha Sesña.¹ The story that unfolds reveals an artist who tried very hard to make a career as a court painter, with meager success. Meléndez painted the 1772 *Still Life with Beef* over a portrait of Ferdinand VI, which the artist may have executed while serving as an apprentice under Louis-Michel van Loo. Extensive x-radiography analysis of Meléndez's paintings opens intriguing views into his methods and career. The 1772 *Still Life with Beef* is itself an elaboration on *Still Life with Beef, Condiments and Receptacles* (c. 1771), created as part of the only official commission Meléndez ever received. Luis's father, Francisco Antonio Meléndez (1682–1758) was a successful painter of manuscript miniatures. The catalogue includes reproductions of tempera-on-vellum examples, colorful and rather decadent, by father and son. Luis and Francisco, who both had a reputation for being temperamental, were expelled from the Royal Academy of Arts in Madrid. Luis Meléndez made four petitions for an appointment as royal

painter (*pintor de cámara*); all were rejected. You get some idea of what his work as a royal portraitist might have been like from his 1746 *Self-Portrait*, depicting a handsome young dandy brandishing a drawing of a muscular nude. Meléndez took to still life, a genre considered far inferior to history painting, because he was denied other opportunities. Posterity should be grateful, in this case, to the vagaries of patronage.

In 1771, already a middle-aged man, Meléndez received a commission from the Prince of Asturias, the future King Charles IV, for a series of still lifes. Over the next few years, Meléndez made forty-four pictures for the Prince's New Cabinet of Natural History. The project was, as the artist described it, to represent "the four Seasons of the year, and more exactly the four Elements, with the aim of forming an enjoyable Cabinet with all kinds of foodstuffs which the Spanish climate produces."² Such cabinets were a part of court life for centuries, descending into domesticated versions such as the Victorian curio collection. In 1569–70, Francesco I de' Medici commissioned a Studiolo for the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence, which was organized according to the four elements—earth, air, fire and water.³ The Medici Studiolo had a complex mythological program, which Meléndez's paintings lack. But essayist Peter Cherry points out the "encyclopedic character and taxonic approach of the project" and stresses the strategic value of Meléndez's argument: "Packaging



Still Life with Tomatoes, a Bowl of Aubergines and Onions, c. 1771–74

DEREK JOHNS, LONDON

conventional still lifes according to an appropriately enlightened encyclopedic theme—an original and modern concept—was guaranteed to appeal to the cultural pretensions of his patron.”⁴ Water could be implied, in the raw-ingredients still life, by the presence of fish; air, by birds. *Still Life with Bream, Oranges, Garlic, Condiments and Kitchen Utensils* (1772) shows us every scale on the alarmingly bright-eyed fish; *Still Life with Game* (c. 1770) juxtaposes the downy white plumage of two pigeons with a copper cooking pot. Fire is implicit in the cooking pots themselves as well as in the firing process that turns clay into ceramics. These still lifes document not only the produce of Spain but also the handicrafts.

Ceramics and foodstuffs share the stage in many of Meléndez’s still lifes, including two representing the end of a meal. *Still Life with Oranges, Honey Pots and Boxes of Sweets* (c. 1760–65) features a tall Valencian lusterware honey pot alongside a shorter, stouter unglazed specimen of the same vessel; both have tied-on fabric lids, marvelous little drapery studies with their puckered folds. The wooden boxes are irregularly stacked, angled and tilted, and deep shadows add sculptural weight to the improbably crowded arrangement. As usual, Meléndez painted the foreground objects first—nine oranges that almost seem collaged onto the composition. The color and texture of the peel, “dimpled,” as the catalogue authors note, “with tiny dots of white, yellow, green and pink pigment on an orange base layer,”⁵ demonstrate a kind of stunt verisimilitude. Virtuoso realists have been practicing such legerdemain since the fifth century B.C. Greek Zeuxis depicted grapes so convincingly that birds came to peck at his painting. The disorderliness of the object pile in *Still Life with Oranges* is appropriate to a casual dessert. Honey was a more affordable sweetener than sugar, a luxury item. *Still Life with Chocolate Service, Bread and Fruit* (c. 1772) depicts a comparatively formal final course. Meléndez gets a remarkable gloss on the shiny white, orange-striped, fluted Talavera cups. A lustrous, pedestaled silver salver supports a painted Tonalà cup from Mexico, the source of chocolate. This still life focuses on the accoutrements of one of the empire’s culinary revelations, with a brilliant copper chocolate pot at the center. Europeans’ culinary horizons had been broadened by trade and conquest, and exotic foodstuffs, at first considered delicacies, became an integral part of the cuisine. In *Still Life with Tomatoes, a Bowl of Aubergines and Onions* (c. 1771–74), Meléndez focuses on the eccentric curves of the red tomatoes, another food of South American origin. In the twentieth century, New World modernists such as Frida Kahlo and Maria Izquierdo would reappropriate the kitchen still life as a way of celebrating Mexican nationalism.

Meléndez was proud of his depicting skills, although he couched his boasts in the conventional language of piety. He wanted, he wrote, to “imitate so vividly the marvelous works of His wisdom that even the most discerning are often convinced of the reality of the feigned.”⁶ This sounds like sanctified hyper-realism, but Meléndez’s pictures are far removed from the glazed hard-

ness of twentieth-century Photorealism and the centuries-old prestidigitation of *trompe l'oeil*. Contemporary realists might profitably find inspiration in his work. Beyond his daunting technique and verisimilitude lies a high degree of conceptual sophistication. He grasps the essential point that a good representational painting establishes an alternate reality. It presents recognizable forms but transposes them to a visual universe with its own coherence.

Still Life with Cauliflower and Basket of Fish, Eggs and Leeks (c. 1770, cover) is a tour de force. The components may be the ingredients for a meatless Lenten meal, but no cook would pile up the dozen items depicted in this vertical-format painting so close together or with such architectonic majesty. The narrow color range, as limited as the brown-gray palette of Analytical Cubism, focuses our attention on shape and texture. The copper saucepan, usually glowing like an ember in a Meléndez painting, is here tarnished and faded. The oil tin is a cone of grey, an exercise in tonal gradation. The matte white eggs pick up rounded shadows from the twisted basket handle. The catalogue authors point out that Meléndez used broad, smooth strokes for metal, the wooden table and the egg shells but shifted to tiny strokes and spots of mingled color for the centerpiece, the cauliflower. Curly, dusty green leaves cradle a tight cluster of florets. In detail, the flamboyantly dense florets look like a Lilliputian forest. There are only two straight lines in the composition: the table edge and the long iron handle of the saucepan, which thrusts, just visible, back at an angle, between the basket and a shadowy bowl, to emerge against the brownish backdrop. Everything else is curves, from the geometric forms of the utensils to the sinuous twists of the basket to the foamy explosion of the cauliflower.

Meléndez's paintings seem to invite this kind of parsing, the visual equivalent of the literary critic's close reading. His mimetic skills are immediately apparent, but the structural cohesion of his composition is equally compelling. In *Still Life with Melon and Pears* (c. 1772), the foreground elements are a large cantaloupe, its bumpy hide covered with a fine network of white webbing, obsessively detailed, and nine Rubensesque pears. The strong, theatrical light from the left creates sculptural shadows. The fruit looks as if Caravaggio had painted it. Directly behind the fruit rises a woven basket with a white napkin and a pie-like loaf of bread. Behind that, we see the rising tower of an olive barrel topped by a wooden spoon. These objects lock into a truncated trapezoidal pyramid shape, cresting on the right. On the left are a ceramic bowl with an iron lid, a shallow dish with spoons and a cork wine cooler, retreating toward the back on an unusually deep table. Meléndez's permutations on his repertoire of objects seems endless. The same melon is used in *Still Life with Melon, Jug and Bread* (c. 1770), a much tighter vertical composition, where it co-stars with an equally bumpy and rotund Alcorón puchero jug.

Meléndez's masterpieces are his table top still lifes, but he sometimes used another formula, posing fruits in landscape settings. Two examples in this

*Still Life With Artichokes
and Peas in a Landscape*
c. 1771–74
PRIVATE COLLECTION



exhibition—*Still Life with Watermelons and Apples in a Landscape* and *Still Life with Pomegranates, Apples, Azaroles and Grapes in a Landscape* (both 1771)—were part of a series delivered to the Prince of Asturias between 1771 and 1774. These compositions can be related to botanical prints; there is a didactic component. Meléndez shows the pomegranates at different stages of ripeness, from tightly closed to split and splayed, with ruby seeds—uncanny in their light-capturing juiciness—spilling out. He even includes a specimen of pomegranate flower. Peter Cherry remarks that Meléndez arranges fruit “in terms of a dramatic narrative,” showing a fascination “with their physiology and the generative power of nature.”⁷ Meléndez’s depictions are highly naturalistic: the hard rind of the watermelon is effectively juxtaposed with the pulpy flesh, and shiny black seeds are given three-dimensionality by individual highlights and shadows. And yet these paintings have a blatant artificiality and seem far less modern (or timeless) than the interior still lifes. Fruit occupies a rocky ledge, clearly a convenient stand-in for the wooden table top, and looks outsized against backdrops of bosky hills and moving clouds. The scenery has the flatness of a dining room mural. Meléndez continues to use strong light from the left, another implicit rejection of *al fresco* art. Here, he acknowledges the ostensible theme of the Prince’s Cabinet, the Seasons: the pomegranate, Persephone’s fruit, is the emblem of autumn. But the artist’s best instincts respond not to iconography but to the sensuous and formal beauty of objects, natural or crafted by human hands. The landscape still lifes that work best tip over into the surreal. *Still Life with Artichokes and Peas in a Landscape* (c. 1771–74) is a slightly sinister study in green, with stems of peapods engulfing the prickly artichoke globes.

Where do we place Meléndez? Comparisons to his contemporary Chardin yield limited insights. Despite the overlap in subject matter, their surfaces are

markedly different: Chardin's paint-handling is looser, with impasto, dragging and scumbling; Meléndez, while he employs a variety of strokes, achieves a high degree of finish. Meléndez drew on a strong tradition of Spanish still life. The court painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660) was also a master of the popular *bodegón* genre, celebrations of the working kitchen. There is a splendid still life in the foreground of *Old Woman Cooking Eggs* (1618). Juan Sánchez Cotán (1560–1627) positions humble vegetables in simplified boxes of space that give a metaphysical dimension to his tightly rendered melons and cabbages. Sánchez Cotán's illusion of physical heft is carried over into Meléndez's still lifes. One seventeenth-century commentator praised artists' skill at showing "strength and relief" (*fuertza y relieve*): "if the picture from nature possesses relief and force, it appears round like a solid volume and lifelike and deceives the eye as if it were coming out of the picture."⁸ The intense spotlight clarity Meléndez trains on fruit and vessels also suggests the still lifes of Francisco de Zurbarán (1598–1664), although Zurbarán's compositions are more processional: he deploys lemons and oranges like saints in a heavenly phalanx. Meléndez is a worthy successor to these masters. This remarkable exhibition builds on the National Gallery's acquisition in 2000 of the dynamic *Still Life with Figs and Bread* (c. 1770), which demonstrates the power of Meléndez's visual thinking. The "reality of the feigned" is in the miracle of the textures: crusty *pan candeal*, soft figs, cork, wood, copper, an inky glass wine bottle. His compositional genius holds it together with poetic logic. After its National Gallery appearance (May 17–August 23, 2009), "Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life" travels to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (September 27, 2009–January 3, 2010) and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (February 1–May 9, 2010). National Gallery of Art, Constitution Avenue, Washington D.C. Telephone (202) 737-4215. On the web at www.nga.gov

NOTES

1. Gretchen A. Hirschauer, Catherine A. Metzger, Peter Cherry, Natacha Seseña, *Luis Meléndez: Master of the Spanish Still Life* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009), pp. 134 ff.
2. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 11.
3. See Larry J. Feinberg, "The Studiolo of Francesco I Reconsidered" in *The Medici, Michelangelo and the Art of Late Renaissance Florence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press in association with the Detroit Institute of Arts, 2002), pp. 47–65.
4. *Luis Meléndez*, pp. 12, 15.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
6. Cited, *ibid.*, p. 15.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
8. Cited, *El Greco to Velázquez: Art during the Reign of Philip III* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts Publications, 2008), p. 270.